SEWA IN RELIEF:
GENDERED GEOGRAPHIES OF DISASTER RELIEF IN GUJARAT, INDIA

A Thesis in
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by

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ABSTRACT

The discourse of *seva* – selfless service - works within the spaces of the family, community and the nation in India to produce gendered subjects that are particular to their geographic and historic location. This study is a geographic analysis of the discourse of *seva* as it materializes in the context of disaster relief work in the economically liberalizing and religiously fragmented state of Gujarat in India. I conducted ethnographic research in Ahmedabad, Gujarat during 2002-2005 and focused my inquiry on women from an organization whose name itself means service—SEWA, the Self-Employed Women’s Association. SEWA is the world’s largest trade union of informal sector workers and much has been written about SEWA’s union activity, trade and production cooperatives, legal battles, and micro-credit success stories. However, despite SEWA’s almost 30 years of active engagement in disaster relief, there is not a single text focusing on SEWA’s activism in terms of its relief work. I chose SEWA for several reasons, the most important one being its well defined political ideology and an explicitly stated vision for the ‘Indian nation,’ which is inspired by Gandhian and feminist philosophies.

The project emphasizes the spatial negotiations that SEWA workers engage in as they perform their relief work in a complex field dominated by international relief organizations, local caste and religion based groups, national and state establishments and political parties. I argue that SEWA women are able to carve out a niche for themselves in this crowded field, precisely because of their political strategy of labeling themselves as ‘local’ and claiming of their relief work as *seva*. 
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures................................................................. vi
Acknowledgements......................................................... vii

Chapter 1: SEWA and seva
Introduction........................................................................... 1
Gender, Nation, and Gandhi ...................................................... 14
SEWA: An Introduction............................................................ 28
Placing the study: a window into Ahmedabad, Gujarat.................... 33
Methodological perspectives................................................... 46
Dissertation Organization....................................................... 63

Chapter 2: Viewing seva: theoretical lenses
Introduction........................................................................... 67
Seva: The concept............................................................... 68
Scales of seva..................................................................... 84
Postcolonial Seva: producing the self, the nation and the state....... 92
Gendered seva: at home in the world ....................................... 109
Seva Sisters....................................................................... 115
Nation through seva........................................................... 119
Gandhi in relief.................................................................. 127
Summary.............................................................................. 131

Chapter 3: Relief as SEWA
Introduction........................................................................... 134
Relief as seva, relief as SEWA ............................................... 136
SEWA: it’s my mother’s home ............................................... 139
SEWA: relief everyday, always ............................................. 150
SEWA’s Shantipath Kendra: towards a Gandhian nation? .......... 154
Summary.............................................................................. 162
Chapter 4: SEWA’s ‘seva’ and SEWA’s ‘work’
Introduction ............................................................................................................. 163
The socio-spatial circuits of seva: family, community, nation .......................... 166
SEWA in relief ........................................................................................................ 173
Seva is hard work ................................................................................................ 180
Sewing the nation/spinning the wheel: Is it seva or is it work? ......................... 186
SEWA and earthquake relief ............................................................................... 198
Summary ................................................................................................................ 209

Chapter 5: Conclusions ......................................................................................... 213

Bibliography ......................................................................................................... 219
Appendix A: SEWA’s documentation of relief efforts ...................................... 230
Appendix B: SEWA’s documentation of income loss in the informal-sector .... 231
Appendix C: India Shinning Advertisements ...................................................... 232
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Political map of India with Gujarat highlighted..............................34
Figure 1.2: Physical map of Gujarat showing epicenter of 2001 earthquake...........35
Figure 1.3: Map of Ahmedabad City showing location of relief camps..................43
Figure 1.4: Detail 1 showing SEWA offices..................................................44
Figure 1.5: A street vendors cart framing the SEWA bank building.....................44
Figure 1.6: Streets of Ahmedabad...............................................................45
Figure 1.7: On the way to SEWA Academy..................................................60
Figure 3.1: Ela Bhatt with women’s wing of the TLA, a precursor to SEWA..........148
Figure 3.2: SEWA as refuge.................................................................149
Figure 4.1: The nation being spun by the spinning wheel.........................210
Figure 4.2: SEWA women at work.........................................................211
Figure 4.3: ‘Livlihood restoration’ at the camps........................................212
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CHAPTER ONE
Seva and SEWA

Introduction

Every Indian girl, is not born to marry. I can show many girls who are totally dedicating themselves to service, instead of servicing one man.

Gandhi, ‘Advice to Girl Students’ 1927

‘Don’t educate your girls too much or they will not be inclined to serve their elders,’ I grew up hearing my relatives trying to advise my parents on the limits of education, especially for girls. There were numerous stories about men and women who, in pursuit of ‘individualistic’ opportunities, abandoned their ‘moral duty’ of performing seva—selfless service—for their families. Then there were the other kinds of stories, about people (mostly men) who ‘sacrificed’ their futures and devoted their lives to seva. As a child, I also had a hard time understanding why my father’s salaried work in the army was considered one of the highest forms of service—desh seva—while my mother who worked all day between (hardly) paid employment in a school and endless housework at home was not noticed quite as much. This study is a geographic analysis that uses ethnography to examine seva as a process central to the creation of gendered national subjects in contemporary India.

Even as a child, it was not hard to see how the nature of prescribed seva differed for sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law and so on, and reaffirmed the spatiality of social structures that dominated everyday life. So while the sons were (and are) expected to contribute financially towards their parent’s household (remaining

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1 Service for the nation (Desh translates as “nation”).
detached on other fronts), the daughter/daughter-in-law performed the caring and maintaining tasks for the inside space of the household and its members.

Seen in this way, seva appears as a constraining and limiting power that acts within the space of the family to define and control gender relations. The word seva has a geographical connotation as well—seva is usually from ‘inside,’ so one performs seva for one’s family, community, nation, and so on, and it differs from daan (donation), which is usually for another family, a neighboring community, or a different nation. Seva, in the context of the community, or the nation, enables women to escape the restricted space of the household, and might be seen as liberating in that sense. However, even when seva is performed in public space, it always carries connotations of gender, class, caste, and age distinctions and therefore produces different kinds of social subjects depending upon their socio-spatial-temporal locations.

I read seva as a powerful discourse that acts within the spaces of the family and the nation to produce particular subjects. By discourse, I refer to the definition provided by feminist geographer Geraldine Pratt to mean those, “socio-spatial circuits through which cultural and personal narratives are circulated, legitimated, and given meaning.” Discourses are situated in particular places and in that sense are “inherently geographical.” Further they materialize in concrete ways as social practices, differently in different places. Reading seva as a socio-spatial practice allows for an understanding of the materiality of the discourse of seva. Such a critique enables us to see how the discourse of seva contributes towards producing gendered

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subjects that are simultaneously of the family and of the nation—and how the discourses of seva intersect similarly or differently, with the discourses of the family, gender and the nation. Thus in looking at overlapping, competing, and contradictory discourses in place(s) we can better understand seva as a geographic process that materializes at multiple scales to produce particular subjects.

‘We are not doing anything bad when we go out of the house, we are doing seva.’ This sentiment in its various forms resonated in the discussions with almost all the women I talked with regarding their relief work in post-earthquake (2001) and post-Godhra religious conflict (2002) Gujarat. Seva is one of those everyday practices that defines and structures one’s subjectivity as a gendered national subject in an India that like all nations struggles with the tradition versus modernity dichotomy, 55 years after independence. The discourse and practice of seva over the course of India’s history has acquired many forms, from being a personal quest to being part of political projects. As a socio-spatial practice, seva has structured relationships between the Indian nation-state and its populations, between the family and the nation, and between gender and community. The post-1990s period characterized by liberal economic reforms, retreat of the developmental state, and heightened religious nationalism in India, marks yet another shift in this relationship. My research intent is

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3 In this dissertation I will focus more on gender and to some extent on class than on other categories of difference that are equally constituted through seva (caste, age, religion). This is primarily an analytical strategy and makes sense in the light of the working class women’s organization that I have chosen to study for this project. However, in various parts of the project I do point to the other categories as they become apparent in and alongside the category of gender.
to make sense of the relationship of this socio-spatial circuitry of seva and the construction of gendered national identity, in the post-liberalization\(^4\) Indian state.

This project is part of a broader objective within geography: to investigate how spaces, scales and identities are mutually produced and used—in this particular case, in and through, the discourse of seva. My starting point is a geographic understanding of places as “contested, fluid, and uncertain”\(^5\) and a feminist understanding of the social construction of gender and identity. I draw upon feminist scholar Judith Butler’s argument to conceptualize seva as a discourse and as a material practice that constructs identity, both individual and collective. Butler writes, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”\(^6\) However, Butler’s theory is essentially aspatial and has been critiqued for emphasizing discourse over materiality. Pratt, in attempting to read feminist theory through a geographical lens, argues that adding a “geographical imagination” to Butler’s theory helps make concrete Butler’s discourse analysis and allows for a better understanding of agency. Gillian Rose has also explored feminist philosophies through geographical analysis and discussed how “spatialized performances” are productive of gender. Rose proposes that one of the critical tasks for feminists is to subvert bounded space, and through the creation of

\(^{4}\) I use the term post-liberalization to refer to the years after 1990. The Indian state instituted several fiscal reforms in response to the financial crises at the time allowing for an increased flow of foreign investment in the country and gradual disinvestments of the state in numerous public sectors.


new kinds of spaces to destabilize traditional gender roles.7 Feminist geographers have persistently critiqued feminist theory for its lack of engagement with space and place and have argued that not paying attention to the spatial meanings of women’s actions limits our understanding of the ‘nature, content and meanings’ of these actions.8 In this study, I use this critique to examine seva as a set of embodied practices that create particular spaces of gender, nation and class within a liberalizing India. In this way, I bring together Butler’s emphasis on the productive aspects of performance with the geographic insight that all performances are productive of space.

Relief work offers an excellent opportunity to study seva as a socio-spatial performance that constructs identity—identity of both those who are performing relief and of those who are receiving it. First, relief work, as explained to me by my respondents, is driven by a desire to serve. Usually a personal motivation, a sense of ‘moral duty’ led the women I interviewed to perform relief work. Even as the women working in relief camps sought to overcome certain gendered norms by being actively engaged in relief, their descriptions and explanations of their seva in relief camps evoked gendered notions of belonging and citizenship in their ‘Indian’ nation.

Second, relief camps and other sites of relief are transitory zones, often islands in the middle of devastated landscapes or violent conflicts. Tensions run high in these camps as victims seek to re-establish themselves as members of a community, the

nation and the Indian state. Furthermore, relief workers engage in and interact with service at various scales simultaneously and these engagements shape their location in the complex web of competing identities. Geographic research on disaster relief has tended to focus on vulnerability analysis, effects of perceptions on preparedness and mitigation of disasters, differential management of relief between developed and developing world, individual and institutional coping strategies, risk mapping, and damage assessment models. While there is recognition of disasters as a social construction with cultural and political dimensions, there is little geographic research that explores these dimensions. By focusing on the socio-spatial practice of seva in a study of relief work, I propose to bridge this gap. I view seva in relief camps as a multi-scalar, political process that is both produced by and productive of discourses of self, family, community, and nationhood that is further complicated by the recent liberalization policies of the Indian state.

The post-1990s deregulation of the economy and the privatization of many services have resulted in a reduction in governmental bureaucracy and a simultaneous removal of many social security services. It has been noted that the number of NGOs have

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dramatically increased in the decade following liberalization.\textsuperscript{11} Devleena Ghosh in her essay on Nehruvian developmentalism and national fictions writes, “After almost 50 years of self-rule, the old certitudes of Indian politics have crumbled…….This has meant that new ways of imagining the Indian nation are coming into play.”\textsuperscript{12} Ghosh also argues that the failure of state centered national development in the post-independence years has resulted in the growth of religious fundamentalism and the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janta Party (hereafter BJP). The discourse of seva too intersects with these developments in interesting and contradictory ways—the most visible being the Hindu nationalists karseva for the building of a Ram temple on the disputed site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The rhetoric of seva for the nation also gets used in speeches by politicians wooing the diaspora to invest in India and remit money to family and relief/development projects. Moreover, with an increased mobility and the ‘dollar dreams’ of the Indian middle-class, the practice of seva for the elderly within the family appears to be shifting to a more professionalized setting. While the dynamics of these transitions are complicated and cannot be attributed solely to any one development (such as liberalization), they nevertheless transform the practice and discourse of seva, gender, and nation, in overlapping ways. Paying attention to the spatial contexts of these shifts, such as the differences or similarities between seva at home, and seva in public space, brings to light the dynamics of these transformations and reveals the contradictions that emerge between

\textsuperscript{11} While in 1988 there were 12,000 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs, there are now more than 2 million. For more on the growth of the NGO sector see Kamat, Sangeeta. 2002. Development Hegemony: NGOs and the State in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Also for a good discussion of the complex field of social service NGOs in India see Nagar, Richa and Raju, Saraswati. 2003. “Women NGOs and the contradictions of Empowerment and Disempowerment: A conversation.” Antipode 35:1. (1-13).

discourse and social action. Furthermore, not only do social practices and their meanings undergo transformation but that these transformations rework and reconstruct place itself in a dynamic relationship. Ethnography allows scholars to delve into these intersections between place, structure, and agency and engage with the contradictions that become apparent in order to make sense of discourses, such as seva, as situated practices, in particular geographic contexts.

I focus my inquiry on women from an organization whose name itself means service—SEWA, the Self Employed Women’s Association. It is the world’s largest trade union of informal sector workers and much has been written about SEWA’s union activity, trade and production cooperatives, legal battles, and micro-credit success stories. However, despite SEWA’s almost 30 years of active engagement in disaster relief, there is not a single text focusing on SEWA’s activism in terms of its relief work. I chose SEWA for several reasons, the most important one being its well defined political ideology and an explicitly stated vision for the ‘Indian nation.’

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13 One of the first works to be published about SEWA is Rose, Kalima. 1992. Where women are leaders. London: Zed Books. This book documents the history and ideology of the movement as it grew from being a part of the TLA to the world’s largest trade union. More recent works include Nussbaum, Martha. 2000. Women and Human Development: the capabilities approach. New York: Cambridge University Press. Here Nussbaum uses SEWA as a case study to develop the capabilities approach. Crowell, Daniel. 2003. The SEWA Movement and Rural Development: The Banaskantha and Kutch Experience. New Delhi: Sage; numerous thesis and dissertations (Appell, 1996; Rai, 2003; Vyas, 2003; Baruah, 2005), the biography of Ela Bhatt published by the Feminist Press (CUNY) and Ela Bhatt’s autobiographical book (2006) entitled We are poor but so many: the story of self-employed women in India. The numerous publications and unpublished reports and papers written by SEWA members include those by Jhabvala, Chatterjee, Sinha and Bhownick and are accessible through SEWA’s website www.sewa.org. Harvard research cell on Women in the Informal Sector Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO) has published numerous reports on SEWA that are available online on their website www.weigo.org.

14 My emphasis on a well-defined political ideology, in selecting the organization to study, is because it provided a framework for understanding the object of seva and in the case of SEWA, allowed for a clearer analysis of the intersection of gender, nation, and service. While I did study other organizations with equally strong political ideologies, in this project I focus on SEWA for a number of reasons, listed above.
which is inspired by Gandhian and feminist philosophies. SEWA views itself as a 
combination of the women’s movement, the labor movement, and the cooperative 
movement. SEWA is an organization of poor working-class women and a study of 
SEWA complicates the gender and class analysis of the performance of seva as relief. 
SEWA claims to be a Gandhian organization\textsuperscript{15} and Gandhi’s philosophies such as 
political seva guide the ideology of SEWA. A study of SEWA helps situate this 
political seva in present-day India of economic reforms and conflicting 
nationalisms.\textsuperscript{16}

In this project, I focus on disaster relief in the western Indian state of Gujarat, a place which during the course of my study experienced a massive earthquake (2001) and violent Hindu-Muslim violence (2002). The two disasters resulted in thousands of people moving into relief camps. The earthquake happened on 26\textsuperscript{th} January, India’s republic day, and a wave of nationalistic sentiment brought thousands into Gujarat to

\textsuperscript{15} Organizations that subscribe to one or more of Gandhi’s philosophies such as constructive work in the villages, conflict resolution through negotiation, wearing of Khadi and so on. However, it might be argued that all Gandhian organizations adopt the principle of non-violent struggle. Not surprisingly Gandhi forms an integral part of this study. How could that not be? For not only does SEWA claim to be a Gandhian organization, but seva and Gandhi seem synonymous to me. A query for the word ‘service,’ on the 10,000 pages (100 volumes) of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, came up with 7537 hits. Moreover Gandhi is central to (re)shaping the connection between women, seva and the nation; and he provides an excellent formulation of the interconnectedness of scales- that of the body, the nation and the global. Could one study seva without invoking Gandhi?

\textsuperscript{16} During my fieldwork I conducted ethnographic work with two organizations including SEWA. The other organization, the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti is the women’s wing of the Hindu nationalist organization the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Both the Sangh and the Samiti belong to a complex web of organizations that constitute the Sangh Parivar or the family of the Sangh, often times implicated for violent and exclusionist policies the organizations of the Sangh today occupy a growing influence on the Hindu middle-class in India. For the purpose of this dissertation I have chosen to focus on SEWA as I wanted to explore the notion of Gandhian seva in the current post-liberalization climate of Gujarat. Moreover, Samiti’s relief work is very different from that of SEWA as it was primarily a one time effort in one village. Including Samiti in the analysis and writing would have meant writing two dissertations. However, in the conclusions chapter I will point to some interesting overlaps and contradictions that emerge out of the comparison of the two organizations. I see these contradictions as paving the way for future research on the subject of service in post-liberalization and post-colonial India.
do seva for the victims. The liberalized economy enabled millions of dollars to flow into the area and in many ways altered the landscape of social service and disaster relief. The victims of the Hindu-Muslim violence in 2002 were not as fortunate. In the violent backlash against the burning of a train carriage carrying 56 Hindu karsevaks, at least 1000 Muslims were killed. Many more were forced to move into relief camps. At the time, both the state of Gujarat and the central government in Delhi were headed by the Hindu nationalist BJP, so that the targeted Muslim populations received little support. The twin forces of liberalization of the economy and a heightened Hindu nationalism have furthered the uneven development in the region, and created a complex landscape in which multiple discourses of seva interact and compete with each other.

Disaster-prone Gujarat has been referred to as the ‘laboratory of the Hindu Rashtra.’ Gujarat also is known for an active civil society, often credited with the fact that it was Gandhi’s place of primary residence during the freedom movement: many of his social projects found a home in Gujarat. Amidst natural disasters, relief networks, and a vibrant business community there are conflicting articulations of what it means to be ‘Indian,’ or rather who has the right to be one. Hindutva discourses couple with party politics and international development rhetoric to create a Gujarat that is indeed ‘Janus faced.’ Gujarat is a fast and ‘proudly’ liberalizing economy that is

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17 According to the UN Disaster Assessment of the Gujarat Earthquake, the collective relief effort consisted of at least 245 agencies – including 55 national and 99 international organizations, 20 donor governments and 10 UN organizations and Red cross teams from 10 countries. See Chandrapanya, Lomjit. 2000. “When Disaster Strikes: The disaster relief following the Gujarat, India earthquake” in UN Chronicle. Winter 2000.
18 Gujarat is also sometimes referred to as the testing ground of the Hindu nation. Numerous reports and publications have used the above phrase including the film ‘Gujarat - a laboratory of Hindu Rashtra’ directed by Suma Josson. 2003. India.
simultaneously trying to hold on to its ‘glorious ancient past.’ SEWA was formed in Ahmedabad, which is located centrally in Gujarat (see figure 1.1). Although SEWA has spread as a movement to other parts of the country and the world, in Gujarat it has its maximum membership. About 500,000 of its 700,000 women live in Gujarat, and SEWA offices or service centers have a strong presence all over the state.

In this ethnographic study of SEWA’s relief work, I attempt to weave together a story of women as active social and political agents, involved in reconstructing and reproducing existing discourses of gender and nationhood as they go about their relief work in a liberalizing India. I show how working-class women negotiate, and create multiple scales and spaces as they go about performing their relief work. By focusing on working-class women’s agency as relief providers, this study challenges the colonial, anti-colonial, and western feminist rhetoric of the ‘third world woman’ as always a victim. This study of SEWA women articulates not just a political subjectivity of working-class women in Gujarat, India, but also reveals how these women use the concept of seva to produce their own version of an ideal Indian citizen and an ideal India in the process of providing relief. SEWA’s articulation of this ideal

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19 ‘Proud Gujarati’, ‘glorious past’ are terms often used by the current Gujarati Chief Minister Narendra Modi who is implicated with not controlling (or rather actually orchestrating) the religious violence in March 2002. In spite of his alleged role in the violence Modi was reelected to office in the 2003 elections. At the time of my research Gujarat was the only state in India where the BJP (Political party with Hindu nationalist affiliations) held power. Also at the time of my study BJP was the ruling party in the central government at Delhi.

20 In this I follow the lead of several geographers who have argued against the discreteness of spatial scales by challenging for example the local/global binary (Gibson-Graham, 2002); by showing how social construction of identity intersects with local/national/global representations of women (Wright, 1999); and by insisting upon the centrality of the household space in the social construction of scale (Marston, 2000).

nation points towards Gandhian notions for the future of India. I propose that a closer look at SEWA’s discourse of what I will call their Gandhian nation, one constructed through their seva, allows for alternate conceptions of national community. This alternate conception complicates the commonly understood scalar boundaries of the local, regional, national, and international scales. As such, SEWA reveals why a feminist and geographic investigation is important for understanding how such organizations reconstitute place and identity in unpredictable ways through the everyday practices of seva and relief.

However, examining gendered agency in relation to nationalism reveals complicated interactions that are often difficult to untangle. For instance, in this study, I investigate how SEWA uses the discourse of seva both to make women’s labor visible in some ways while making it invisible in others. As I attempt to untangle this conundrum, I follow the feminist insight that we must examine how women in third-world contexts are agents in both their liberation and continued subjugation to various hierarchies of power. Such analysis challenges the idea that third-world women are, a priori, victims of forces beyond their control. And, as I endeavor to show, SEWA substantiates this analysis by both providing the resources for women to overcome numerous obstacles in their personal development and their development as productive national citizens, even as the organization engages with discourses, such as seva which appear exploitative of women’s labor.

In order to make this sort of argument, I rely heavily on the geographical scholarship that examines discourses as spatial practices that directly implicate the meanings of nation, state, gender and citizenship. For example, Lorraine Dowler’s work on women and men in war zones and in firehouses exposes how dichotomies of masculinity/femininity and savior/victim rely upon and produce the spatial constructs of public/private that are critical to the meaning and practice of citizenship.\footnote{Dowler, Lorraine. 1998 “‘And They Think I'm Just a Nice Old Lady' Women and War in Belfast, Northern Ireland” in \textit{Gender, Place and Culture}. 5:2. (159-176). Also see Yarnal, Careen; Dowler, Lorraine; Hutchinson, Susan. 2004, "Don't let the bastards see you sweat: Masculinity, public and private space, and the volunteer firehouse" in \textit{Environment and Planning A} 36:4. (685–699).} My research as a feminist project also draws inspiration from geographer Melissa Wright’s\footnote{Wright, Melissa. “Crossing the Factory Frontier: Gender, Place and Power in the Mexican \textit{Maquiladora}” in Antipode. 29:3. (278-302).} and from anthropologist Ahiwa Ong’s\footnote{Ong, Aihwa. 1987. \textit{Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline}. SUNY series in the anthropology of work. Albany: State University of New York Press.} work on third-world women’s agency amidst local and global discourses that subjectify them in particular ways to establish power and control. In this ethnographic story that I tell, SEWA women emerge as active agents in negotiating and producing power and place as they engage with and rework the often contradictory discourses of local seva, national development, and international aid.

In the rest of this chapter, I provide the background necessary to situate this study theoretically in the recent literature on gender and nationalism, geographically in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and temporally in post-liberalization India. I briefly introduce
SEWA by relating the story of one of its prominent members, Mahimaben. 26

Mahimaben’s story reveals the overlapping and multi-spatial relationship between her work as a tailorress, her work as a SEWA officer, and her seva in the relief camps.

After this introduction of SEWA, I introduce Ahmedabad as the site of this study. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the methodology and my role as an ethnographer in the collection of data.

Gender, nation and Gandhi

We are ashamed that the prime minister of our country has to visit Gujarat at this time. What has happened in Gujarat is terrible. The country was divided in 1947. Today it is as if our hearts are divided. If the people of Gujarat get the government’s support for security then is the normalcy far off? When will this happen? There can never be peace by making Muslims insecure. That is not nationalism. Why don’t our political parties understand this?

Ela Bhat, founder SEWA, briefing to the Prime Minister, 2002 (emphasis mine)

SEWA relief workers claim that their seva in the relief camps is in fact seva for their nation. Much of their discourse about this nation points towards Gandhi’s conception of the future of India. Ela Bhat, in discussing SEWA’s achievements and “yearning for the second freedom” writes, “Gandhi’s thinking has shown us the way, a clear direction.”27 In moving away from and providing an alternative to Nehruvian ideas of high modernism for India, SEWA women are redefining the notions about the future of the Indian nation-state. In this section, I want to make sense of the discourses of

26 Names of all SEWA members except for that of Ela Bhatt, founder SEWA have been changed. While later in the dissertation, I engage more with SEWA as an organization; here I make the deliberate gesture of introducing SEWA by introducing Mahimaben. I want to assign both an individual, and a collective subjectivity to the participants in relief work, and focusing primarily on the organization takes away the individual subject.
SEWA’s notion of a “Gandhian nation.” Some of the questions I ask include: What does the socio-spatial practice of seva have to do with this discourse of SEWA’s Gandhian nation? In what particular ways is SEWA’s Gandhian nation gendered? The purpose of this section is also to situate my project within the broader literature on the construction of gendered national identities so as to examine the multiple contexts in which women’s seva is productive and reproductive of national discourses.

Gandhi is popularly known as the ‘father of the nation’—the Indian nation-state. Paradoxically, his vision of a community was one unbounded by national borders—a more global community, one that is produced through local seva. SEWA’s imagination of a community too reflects many of the same paradoxes. SEWA works within the constraints of an independent Indian nation-state, many times alongside, and often in resistance to the programs of this state. Even as they have a vision for the future for their India, their work and seva is inherently and deliberately local. The internet and other communication technologies have allowed SEWA to form the global communities of homenet and streetnet, among others. How and why do SEWA women use the geographical constructs of local, national, and global? Why do they insist on serving locally and yet characterize their local seva as national? How do we understand their commitment to the project of the nation, and simultaneous call for a global solidarity of working-class women? This ethnography of SEWA enables us to visualize the overlapping and mutually constitutive scalar dynamics of the local, national, and global scales.
Yuval-Davis and Anthias\textsuperscript{28} outline five ways in which women are involved with nationalism: as biological reproducers of the members of ethnic collectives; as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; as participants in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; as signifiers of ethnic/national difference; as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories; and as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles. Within the past two decades, a huge body of literature has emerged that has empirically demonstrated the numerous ways in which gender and nationalism are mutually constituted.\textsuperscript{29} Academic work related to the women and the nation focus on two main relationships: that of women as metaphors of the nation, and that of women as active participants in the national project.\textsuperscript{30} Geographers too have engaged with and contributed to this body of literature.

Geographer Catherine Nash’s work on Ireland shows how the symbolic gendering of the geographical regions in Ireland was worked out in relation to the identification of the Irish woman with an “authentic” nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century.


In a similar vein, Pyrs Gruffudd showed how notions of Welshness were constructed as rural and masculine in the period between the world wars. Further Sarah Radcliffe illustrates through her work on Ecuador how rural indigenous women become symbolic of the nation’s “backwardness” while the “white” urban woman become representative of the progress of the nation. All of these studies point to the importance of geographic location in understanding the gendered symbolism within nationalism. In all of these national constructions, women are symbolic of the nation, and not quite agents in the project of nation-building.

Lorraine Doweler’s work on the Irish Republican Army makes visible women’s contributions to the nationalist cause, both from within their home, and as active soldiers. However, as Dowler argues, the women could only become soldiers by losing their identities as mothers—they could not be recognized as both. More recently Stephen Legg highlighted ways in which women in colonial India achieved agency even as they were spatially limited to the home. While nationalist historiographies of India have recognized the women who joined processions and protests in public, Legg argues that there is limited attention to those who were active participants within the political context of the home. Very much in line with the disciplinary focus, geographers have contributed to the discussion of gender and

33 Dowler. 1998.
national identities by paying close attention to the spaces that are produced by and productive of these identities.

Interactions of women with nationalism have played out differently in different spatial and temporal contexts. Within the Indian context, Partha Chatterjee has written about the historical construction of nationalism as a discourse that relied upon an inherently gendered dynamic thereby resulting in a “new patriarchy.”35 This “new patriarchy,” according to Chatterjee involved the nationalist discourse of spiritual/material, materializing as a spatial division between the inner/outer or home/world—each domain in a dynamic relationship with the other thereby transforming it, even while asserting separateness. Other scholars have investigated the gendered dynamics of nationalism in the Indian context both historically—such as Mrinialini Sinha’s study on the discursive construction of ‘colonial masculinity,’ Lata Mani’s study on the public discourse on Sati, Uma Chakhravati’s on the high-caste Hindu women’s incorporation into the nineteenth century national imagination; and in contemporary India—Paola Bachetta’s study on the Hindu Nationalist Women’s reimaginations of the Hindu nation and Amrita Basu’s study on women’s activism within the discourse of Hindu nationalism, among others. My study furthers the trajectory by emphasizing the overlapping socio-spatial circuitry of the discourses of nationalism and discourses of gender, in the context of relief work, in an economically liberalizing and religiously fragmented Gujarat.

Further, I hope to explore the connections between feminisms and nationalisms. In looking at the seva of SEWA, a poor working class women’s organization, and their discourse of seva for the nation, I propose to contribute towards that move. Very much articulating a feminist consciousness, the founder of SEWA, Ela Bhatt writes, “Coming out of their exploitation by men, society, and the state, the poor, poor women, wanted to enjoy what we at SEWA now call Second Freedom: Doosri Azadi.”36 Then on the same page Bhatt articulates a nationalist identity, “I feel very proud of my nation, and I am proud of the strength of our sisters. I do feel like celebrating the future of the past 50 years of India’s independence in which India is coming centre stage in global forces, progressive and other.”37 Ela Bhat’s writings about SEWA’s work of “building the nation in whose lap we grew” and “trying to build women for second freedom” point to connections between feminisms and nationalisms. SEWA’s feminist and class-focussed struggles are very much embedded in its vision for the future of India. Therefore, for SEWA, its feminist and nationalist projects constitute each other and are not mutually exclusive.

Kumari Jayawardhana’s book38 entitled Feminisms and Nationalisms in the Third World was a critical contribution in highlighting the intertwinnings and the tensions, between feminisms and nationalisms, and in challenging the first world feminist discourse on the third world women. However, even as Jayawardhena discusses the mutual histories of nationalisms and feminisms in twelve different third world countries she argues that the role of women was “contributive” rather than central to

36 Bhatt. 1999. (2)
37 Ibid
nationalism. Lois West’s edited collection on *Feminist Nationalism* advances the debate by proposing a theory of feminist nationalism and arguing for a ‘gendered cultural relativism: relativizing of the struggles of feminists and nationalists to their historical, cultural, social, and economic time and place.’\(^{39}\) Lois West asks how feminism can construct nationalism, and she answers:

Work and the struggle for the nation are not prioritized over family/leisure and the struggle for women. They are dealt with simultaneously, as women deal with family and work/leisure simultaneously. “Mixed” realities are managed, and women are actors, not simply reactors.\(^{40}\)

In many ways, if one follows Lois West’s definition of a feminist nationalism then SEWA’s discourse of the nation that draws upon the Gandhian philosophy of *swaraj*—self-rule both in the individual sense and the national sense—self-development as national development—can be read as a discourse of feminist nationalism. However, as I show using my ethnographic study, this SEWA’s feminist Gandhian nationalism is not without its contradictions and fractures emerge as SEWA’s collective ideology intersects with the individual identities of the SEWA members.

Jill Vickers\(^{41}\) explores the relationship between feminism and nationalism over a broad geographic and historic spectrum and shows how no single universal relationship exists as there are a variety of nationalisms and a variety of feminisms. For example, while in Quebec feminists—precisely because they are feminists—participate in political struggles including nationalism; in Serbia, the dominant state


\(^{40}\) Ibid. (xxxi)

nationalism posed a deterrent to much feminist participation. The participation of women in the project of the nation varies over space and time. In a liberalizing India, oscillating between the twin forces of an “open economy,” and increasingly exclusionary religious nationalism, too much is at stake for women and feminists to not engage with the discourses of nationalisms.

Ranjoo Seodu Herr’s recent article on *The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism* points to the allure of national self-determination even in today’s global age, and argues for a reconceptualization of nationalism with feminist interests in mind. Herr’s reconceptualized nationalism is a ‘polycentric nationalism’ which Herr argues is achieved through the recognition of dual goals—the “external” goal which is self-determination understood as achievable through multiple formulations, but more importantly an “internal” goal which “involves dynamic negotiations among divergent members of the nation.”

I agree with Herr’s call for looking at alternate discourses of nationalism. I argue along with Gibson-Graham that our discourse of capitalism and community (as the nation in this case), contributes to the production of that particular form of the nation, which we critique. We need to look at and theorize alternative visions of the nation. One such opportunity is SEWA’s discourse of the nation, which draws upon Gandhian philosophy – that I refer to as SEWA’s Gandhian nation.

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SEWA’s Gandhian nation

Ela Bhatt emphatically discusses that it is Gandhiji’s spirit that inspires her to work with the poor, in a quest to build “village republics” as the foundation for a prosperous Indian democracy.43 Within SEWA, the message is very clear and all SEWA workers claim that Gandhi’s thinking has shown them the way – a way that has led to their self-development as they work towards the development of the nation.

In order to understand the connections that SEWA workers draw between the micro-scale of their lives and the national scale we need to take a closer look at Gandhi’s philosophy.

Ajay Skaria provides an excellent insight into the difference between a Gandhian conception of the nation and the liberal conception. Skaria argues that in the case of the liberal conception, the nation is constituted “through a logic of secular transcendence, where locality is transcended to arrive at the generality of the nation.”44 The liberal nation, Skaria asserts, does not allow for difference and strives to produce a “neutral shared space” in which a “process of partition separates the particular from the general.” He gives the example of religious faith that gets to be confined to the private sphere. The same logic applies to the construction of gender within the liberal nation, where the male becomes the universal while the female the particular.

43 Bhatt, Ela. 2006. We Are Poor but So Many: The Story of Self-Employed Women in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
The Gandhian nation, on the other hand, is constituted not on the “logic of transcendence,” but through that of neighborliness—achieved only through *ahimsa* (non-violence). Skaria describes Gandhi’s neighborly nationalism in the following words:

Neighbors shared nothing less (or more) than the kinship of all life; beyond this, the neighbor was marked by an absolute difference. In the face of such absolute difference, relations were created through *tapasya* or “suffering.” The *tapasya* of neighborliness differed depending on the kind of absolute difference being addressed: the equal was met with *mitrata* (friendship), the subordinate with *seva* (service), and the superior with *satyagraha*\(^45\) (civil disobedience).\(^46\)

Gandhi’s nationalism does not deny or make invisible the hierarchies within the nation. Instead, he sought to create kinship between the politically empowered and the marginal. The nation was to be constructed not by containing heterogeneity or suppressing antagonisms but by developing protocols for relationships between those differently located in the social and religious structures. In Skaria’s analysis, Gandhi’s nationalism emerges not as exclusionary but as neighborly. He quotes Gandhi:

> Man is not omnipotent. He therefore serves the world best by first serving his neighbor. This is Swadeshi, a principle which is broken when one professes to serve those who are more remote in preference to those who are near.

Second neighbourliness involved serving universal brotherhood through the immediate neighbor. A man’s first duty is to his neighbor….if every one of us performed his duty to his neighbor, no one in the world who needed assistance would be left unattended. Therefore one who serves his neighbor serves all the world….Indeed it is the only way open to us of serving the world.\(^47\)

We can see how in Gandhian thought the national community is constituted among other practices, through seva, through one’s service to the neighbor, who is different.

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\(^45\) I think a better translation of *satyagraha* is ‘truth force’ or non violent resistance

\(^46\) Ibid. (957).

\(^47\) Ibid. (975).
Here in the discourse on Gandhian nationalism we also see the paradox of defining a national community, when indeed the discussion is about the local neighbor or the global community (serving the world). While one could explain this by arguing that the scale of Gandhi’s political project at the particular historic moment was national—the struggle for national self-determination and even has his ideas were more on a humanitarian scale they remained bounded by the imagined national borders. However, another approach would be to reconceptualize nations as not a fixed entity. Why do nations need to always be viewed as a “limited” any more than any other form of community is limited? Is there any community that is unlimited? By stressing on the “limits” of national identity, we fail to see the dynamics of national identity as materializing on many different scales in many different ways, such that being an Indian might have a different meaning to a rural farmer than it would mean to a globe-trotting businessperson. Moreover, seen in this way, it would not be mutually exclusive to be a Gujarati, an Indian, a South Asian, and a member of the global community simultaneously—in fact one would constitute the other. SEWA women view themselves as belonging to a particular trade group, a particular village, a particular region, to India, and indeed the global community. Nationalism does not for them limit their imagined community to any particular scale. This ethnography of SEWA’s relief work in exploring the dynamics of SEWA’s discourses related to nationalism, Gandhian seva, and gender attempts to explore how SEWA’s feminist, nationalist, socialist, and humanitarian goals work together, at multiple scales, sometimes in tandem with each other, and sometimes in opposition to each other.
Seva, in Gandhian thought, emerges as a clearly gendered discourse. He saw women as ideally suited to the performance of seva, thereby constructing an image of them as self-sacrificing, and “capable of infinite love.” For Gandhi, seva was to be performed not just for social reform but also for self-reform. He argued that by serving the oppressed, women can empower themselves, and make common cause with those that are oppressed.

Madhu Kishwar (1985) and Sujata Patel (1988) have traced the development of Gandhi’s ideas related to women. It is commonly known that Gandhi’s involvement in the nationalist movement resulted in the emergence of a large number of women into the public sphere, as nationalists. Unlike nationalist movements that often subsume women’s interest in the cause for national independence; in Gandhian nationalism, the cause for women’s empowerment and national freedom went hand in hand. He argued that “to postpone social reform, till the attainment of swaraj, is not to know the meaning of swaraj.” The meaning of swaraj for Gandhi was self-rule, not just in terms of an independent nation, but also in the sense of individual self-control and local self-determination. Devaki Jain (1986) suggests that because of Gandhi’s struggle to build “self-reliance from the individual level right up the nation” he was “methodologically” a feminist. She argues that for Gandhi, “the means were as important as the ends.”

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50 Gandhi, Mohandas. *Young India*. June 28, 1928
While Gandhi has been hailed as a feminist and as responsible for envisioning a nationalist movement with an equal participation of women, he has also been critiqued for his failure to understand that “oppression is not an abstract moral condition but a social and historical relation, related to production relations.”\(^{51}\) In his attempt to maintain a harmonious relationship between men and women he sought to transform women’s conditions without transforming their “relation to the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality and reproduction.”\(^{52}\) However, Kishwar has also pointed out that Gandhi is “one of those few leaders whose practice was far more radical than the words he used for describing it.”\(^{53}\) Moreover, in my reading of Gandhi, relations of production were not limited to industrial production but were much broader. Gandhi advocated home-based production and spiritual politics and in that sense blurred the boundaries between inner and outer spatial constructs. In fact as Ela Bhatt contends, Gandhi saw economic self-reliance for all as integral to political freedom. Kishwar maintains, and I agree that Gandhian influence helped women become agents not merely of their own empowerment but also of the whole nation.

SEWA’s seva in relief camps can be seen as giving form and root to their version of the Gandhian nation. Moreover, SEWA’s conception of the Gandhian nation does articulate a clear relationship between oppression and systems of production. In Ela Bhatt’s reading of Gandhi, he called economic poverty as equivalent to a ‘moral collapse of society.’ In Bhatt’s tracing of SEWA’s history and ideology, “the problem

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
of poverty and the loss of freedom are not separate” and the freedom that SEWA envisions is “not possible without access to and ownership of resources by poor women.”

Spatially located in the BJP ruled state of Gujarat, the study reveals the negotiations SEWA women have to engage in so as to be able to do their relief work and pursue their vision for a Gandhian nation. For example, in a climate of religious tensions and the widely circulating discourse of Hindu nationalism, SEWA women strategize between being openly oppositional, working together, or working quietly on their own. The field of relief work is inundated with local, national, and global discourses on women, seva, and nation. For example, much of the discourse in international relief work positions developing countries as ‘inefficient’ in managing disaster, much of the human rights discourse presents women as forever victims (often conflated with children), the discourses of the nation and community position women as reproducers of the nation and as boundary markers, Gujarati discourse on women presents women as powerful and worthy of worship while in practice female infanticide persists. SEWA women work with these often contradictory discourses to resist and rework them and in the process redefine the contexts from which these discourses emerge. SEWA has been instrumental in redefining national policy on informal sector workers, and the international (ILO) stance on home-based workers.

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54 Bhatt. 1999. (3)
In this study, I show how much of this national and international work constitutes, and is constituted by SEWA’s on-the-ground seva in local contexts. I do so by drawing from Geraldine Pratt’s work on transnational migration and identity. In juxtaposing Canadian and Philippino discourses on women, immigrants, child-care, and citizenship Pratt highlights the geographical contexts of these discourses. Pratt shows how “individuals draw strength from transporting meanings from one context to another” and by bringing multiple discourses in relation to each other. While in my particular study, SEWA women are not dealing with international migration, they are nevertheless dealing with international, national, and local, individuals and organizations as they coalescence onto the field of disaster relief in the state of Gujarat in India—each bringing with them their own set of discourses. This ethnography of SEWA enables a geographic understanding of how SEWA’s place-bound action challenges and reworks discursive constructions originating at multiple scales and contexts.

SEWA: An Introduction

Maine aapko kaha na ki humari jaati kaamdharon ki hai (I told you our tribe/caste is that of working-class women).

Mahimaben

I met Mahimaben in her small office in SEWA’s union building during my second research trip to Ahmedabad in 2004. Mahimaben has been associated with SEWA for the last 30 years; in that sense her story is the story of SEWA itself. Today she is one

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56 Pratt. 2004. (64).
57 The ‘ben’ at the end of the names is Gujarati for sister. In Gujarat women young women address each other as ‘ben’ or sister and men as ‘bhai’ or brother. If a woman is senior in age and position she is addressed as ‘tai’ (father’s elder brother’s wife) if she is married; or as ‘mausi’ (mother’s sister) if she is unmarried.
of the elected officers within an organization that has at least 500,000 members in Gujarat. SEWA, registered as a trade union of informal sector workers in 1972, has expanded to 700,000 members across India. A majority of the 700,000 belong to the marginalized lower castes and about 25 % of SEWA members are Muslims. The first thing Mahimaben told me about herself was that she is divorced, Muslim, and a tailoress and that is why she joined SEWA. Thirty years back, her link to SEWA was her mother, who first joined the organization and would tell her about the need to organize, to push for regulation, and ways to increase income- all things that she learnt from SEWA literacy sessions. Mahimaben would stitch clothes from her home for a contractor who exploited them by paying meager wages or sometimes no wages at all. She told me that as a married Muslim woman she was not allowed to leave her house and so was restricted in her employment. In 1976, after a few years of a troubled marriage, she split with her husband. Mahimaben was 19 then, and had children to support. With assistance from SEWA, she helped form a local cooperative of women in her neighborhood, tailoresses who worked on a piece-rate basis. They were paid based on the number of clothes they stitched. The need to increase income was great and Mahimaben, already inspired by her mother (and father), became the organizer for her primarily Muslim locality. Soon her leadership potential was acknowledged by Elaben (the founder of SEWA, and an eminent labor union lawyer) who invited Mahimaben to take up a paid position in SEWA as an organizer at a much larger scale, that of the city. Mahimaben says that she immediately understood the message. Very much articulating a Gandhian logic of mass involvement, Mahimaben explained, “If we have to make rules and regulations we have to involve
every woman tailoress. If it is just you and me, and even if it is all the women in just my neighborhood—it won’t do. We need to carry everyone along.” Mahimaben accepted SEWA’s offer and moved to the office building in which she continues to work today. She quickly points out that although she works in an office and earns a decent salary, she never gave up her work as a tailoress. She says, “maine abhi bhi nahi choda apna silayi ka kaam kyonki usi se mujhe vikas ka raasta mila hai (I have still not left my stitching work because through that only I have found my path to self-development).”

Mahimaben’s and her tailoresses’ union have struggled for 27 years, and they can now claim to have won many battles with the government, contractors, and within their own communities. Mahimaben explained to me in great detail how she sees her work in SEWA as community service, a way of performing seva, and how in the process of organizing she has “uplifted the people in her Muslim locality and showed them the path to development.” Her community service is not limited to just those that are in the union but to projects like “getting the dirty streets cleaned by municipal authorities, questioning unreasonable religious rituals, and using her position in SEWA to call up officials when her locality needs protection from violent mobs.” Initially, Mahimaben told me, she had a lot of resistance from traditional Muslim families in her neighborhood, but now, she says “they have seen how I have improved my condition, my family’s position, and that of the neighborhood, now they all come to me for advice.”
Mahimaben does not think that being Hindu or Muslim should in anyway come in the way of SEWA’s solidarity. She reminds me again that their real religion is “kaamdhari,” simply translated as ‘one who works.’ She believes that she is not unique and that there are many others who, like her, work for their communities. “Together we are contributing to the development of the nation,” she adds.

Mahimaben’s sentiments echo SEWA’s vision, as articulated by its founder, for India.

The most sustained experience of my life since India’s independence is the search for the second freedom, economic empowerment of and with the poor and toiling women of India.

Ela Bhatt (emphasis mine)

SEWA claims to work towards this ‘second freedom’ and, in doing so, imagines another India, in which its members -- the poor working-class women -- are economically empowered and equal citizens. “Every time there is a disaster, we go and provide relief. Our seva always results in an increase in our membership; this time we got a whole new generation,” says Mahimaben. Being poor, informal sector workers and women, they are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy, and are often perceived as helpless and exploited. This realization gives them the impetus to join in the collective in which SEWA women find their strength that ultimately subverts the power equation in their favor. SEWA women chose not to call themselves as belonging to the informal sector, or as peripheral or marginal. Instead, they have chosen the label ‘self-employed,’ thus assigning themselves agency and a selfhood that is often denied to them by the virtue of their class, caste and gender position.

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58 In commonly understood academic language one could arguably use working-class
59 Bhatt. 1999. (1)
SEWA women in their everyday lives and in their relief work transgress norms of masculinity/femininity, public/private, and victim/savior; while at the same time engaging with discourses that reinforce these binaries. In defining their relief work as seva, they present themselves as constructive members of the nation. The ethic of seva holds special relevance in Gujarat where it intertwined with Gandhi’s ‘constructive program’ to become central to the construction of the ‘Indian nation.’

With Gandhi’s prodding, it became more than a family or community affair, to one that pertains to the national scale. The scaling up has enabled women to transcend traditional definitions of seva, as within the home, to seva for the nation (as one’s home).

In the post-liberalization times of contemporary India, seva is further complicated in terms of its spaces and scales of performance. The local, national and transnational actors overlap and interlink to provide a complex geographic space within which seva is articulated. This overlapping space of scales is immediately visible in the case of disaster relief where actors and organizations from multiple spaces coalesce into the field of relief work. Questions about who funds, who performs, who receives and what gets constituted in the process are all central to an understanding of contemporary seva in a global India.

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60 While Gandhi is often credited with constructing seva as a national need, even before Gandhi, Gujarat had a history of community seva, a legacy of the Swaminarayan movement. While the initial proponents of the Swaminarayan movement articulated a certain inclusiveness to all religions, contemporary forms of the movement are seen as subscribing to the Hindu nationalist ideology.
Placing the study: a window into Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Gujarat is Mahatma Gandhi’s home state, a place where many of his ideas of non-violent protest and struggle became part of the mass movement for India’s freedom. Ironically, Gujarat today is one of the most violent states in India.\textsuperscript{61} In terms of its physical geography, Gujarat is also one of the most disaster-prone areas in the region. In 2002, a series of religious and nationalistic riots led to over a thousand deaths and to the displacement of over fifty thousand people who fled to relief camps. In the years preceding the riots a massive earthquake (2001), two years of extreme drought (2000, 2001) and a cyclone (1999) had already forced thousands into relief camps, where caste and religious tensions run high. In recognition of the desperation that has resulted from the combination of “natural” disasters and violent conflicts, local and international organizations have created networks to provide humanitarian assistance. Gandhian principles of non-violence, \textit{sarvadharam sambhavna} (tolerance for all religions), \textit{swadeshi} (of one’s own nation)\textsuperscript{62} and \textit{sewabhav} (inner desire to serve) are pervasive in the ideologies of many organizations in the region, most selectively appropriating one or the other of his principles.


\textsuperscript{62} While \textit{swadeshi} literally translates as ‘of one’s own nation,’ Gandhi’s idea of swadeshi was more to do with production of hand-made goods, that are labor intensive, do not dehumanize and promote self-reliance. However, in the narrower sense the term \textit{swadeshi} has been used historically and now to mean economic nationalism.
Figure 1.1: Political map of India with Gujarat highlighted, 2001
Source: The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin
Gujarat is the westernmost part of India and shares its northern border with Pakistan (see Figure 1.1). Gujarat is among the most industrialized of the Indian states and ranks high in terms of GDP and growth rate. It was one of the first states to initiate a policy of economic liberalization resulting in contradictory consequences. For example, SEWA women assert that while globalization has opened up new avenues of employment like diamond polishing, pharmaceuticals, and export oriented textile production, other long-standing occupations like beedi-rolling and weaving have

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declined. SEWA women also discuss the impact of the earthquake on the construction industry which owing to stringent regulations now is not as open an employment avenue as it was before. Prior to the earthquake in 2001, three years of successive drought had increased unemployment and poverty in rural Gujarat to a great extent. Moreover, according to SEWA academy studies, the market for many of the popular cash crops like tobacco has declined since the 1990s, whereas spices, sugar, and bananas have become high value crops.

The state of Gujarat accounts for a mere 5 percent of India’s population, while its share of the national GDP is at 11 percent and its private consumption is documented to be 10 percent, pointing to a long standing industrial economy. A closer look however reveals that the ‘development’ is not so even. Rural Gujarat as is the rest of rural India is disproportionately poor while gender inequity is visible with women earning 30% less then men and having almost no property ownership. In India, Gujarat is the only state where the BJP holds power without a coalition. The rule of the BJP in Gujarat with their emphasis on *Hindutva* (the philosophy that India should be a Hindu nation), and exclusivist policies has resulted in an increasingly polarized state.

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SEWA began in Ahmedabad, Gujarat in the 1970s, as an offshoot of India’s first labor union, the Textile Labor Association (TLA). While the TLA is effectively debunked, SEWA still continues to be very active in the city, the Gujarat state, and has expanded within and beyond India’s national borders. Ahmedabad is Gujarat’s most populous city with 4.8 million inhabitants; 15% of which are Muslims. Clearly a minority in a city (and the state), controlled and dominated by the Hindu right, the Muslims were the worst affected during riots. The targeting of Muslims continues after the riots as flyers for economic boycott circulate quite openly in the city.

It is important to point out that Gujarat and particularly Ahmedabad were at one point known for being zones of conciliatory and tolerant communal relations. The wealthy Jain and Vaishnava Bania communities that have long dominated the business and cultural life in Ahmedabad developed the institution of mahajan, bringing together disparate communities and castes. In 1725 and again in 1781, Hindus, Muslims, and Jain merchants joined hands to protect Ahmedabad from invaders. The institution of the mahajan evolved a mechanism of conciliation and arbitration that prevented violent disputes to a large extent. Makrand Mehta argues that this was largely attributed to the commercial ethos of the city and the prominence of its business leaders in civic life.

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Gujaratis\textsuperscript{70} are commonly known for their enterprise and business acumen and have a long tradition of voluntary work, merchant networks, and philanthropic activity.\textsuperscript{71} The nature of philanthropic activity has changed over the years. The second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was marked by visible welfare acts, mostly architectural and landscape projects, such as construction of parks and gardens or public water huts and benches meant for specific communities. These were mostly based on community allegiance or family ties. The Jain ethos of \textit{jeev daya} (concern of all living beings) has been a central characteristic of Gujarati society and reflects in the work ethic of voluntary organizations in the region. Moreover, since the 1920s Gandhi’s influence on voluntary organizations in Gujarat has been strong historically and to a limited extent remains so even now. However, today a marked professionalization of voluntary work marks the scene and is apparent by the number of well-funded NGOs in the state. How has this transition affected the nature of seva involved, and what relationship does this seva have to the national imagination? Gujarat, with a long history of voluntary work, conflicting nationalisms, and economic liberalization offers an ideal location to answer this question.

I chose Ahmedabad in Gujarat for my study as it is the largest of the three metropolitan cities in Gujarat and the seventh largest in India.\textsuperscript{72} SEWA has a significant membership in the city and along with its usual urban complexities;

\textsuperscript{70} The identity of Gujarati is now almost seen as Gujarati Hindu. Muslims, especially after the BJP’s rise to power are usually viewed as outsiders. Part of this is reinforced by most Muslims not using Gujarati as a language and having a different women’s dress (most do not usually wear a sari). One of the Muslim women told me that she got spared during the riots because she was wearing a sari and that she could speak Gujarati.


\textsuperscript{72} Ahmedabad has a population of about 4.5 million (Director of Census Operations, 2001)
Ahmedabad offers a history of union activity, fundamentalist nationalism, and secular struggle. Gujarat’s industrial history is largely situated in Ahmedabad which has experienced a series of migrations related to the industrial developments. It is estimated that in 1941 more than 80% of the population of Ahmedabad was directly or indirectly dependent on the textile mills in the city.\textsuperscript{73} Civic life in Ahmedabad has been strongly influenced by both capital and labor organizations. The Ahmedabad Mill Owners Association was formed in 1891 and the Textile Labour Association in 1920. These two associations together introduced a series of social service organizations in Ahmedabad related to the ‘welfare’ of women, children, lower-castes, and tribals, many of which survive to this day. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, the textile mills had mostly closed down and a period of deindustrialization forced many into the informal economy. This decline of the mill culture also contributed to the decline of the civic vibrancy that characterized industrial Ahmedabad. Most of the Gandhian establishments also deteriorated to become mere tourist attractions or institutionalized places visited only by researchers and academics studying Gandhi. The shift in the civic culture of Ahmedabad was also accompanied by a shift in the electoral politics of Gujarat.

Up until very recently (1990s), the Congress party dominated the election results and held almost unchallenged power in the state. In the immediate post-independence era the Gandhian labor union and the Congress party shared an idealism and commitment to social reform that changed when the Congress party split into two factions in the

\textsuperscript{73} Baruah, Bipasha. 2005. \textit{Sisters are doing it for themselves: Challenges and opportunities in landed property ownership for informal sector women in urban India}. PhD Dissertation: Toronto: York University.
1969. Ashutosh Varshney in his study on Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life claims that after the passing away of the leaders associated with the freedom struggle, the Congress party politicians became primarily interested in the pursuit of power, which resulted in an ideological vacuum that by the 1990s was filled by the Hindu nationalist politics of the BJP.\textsuperscript{74} The conflicts between religious and secular nationalism, and between labor unions and a liberalizing Gujarat, have created a fractured and fragmented civil society in Ahmedabad.

The spatial structure of Ahmedabad also physically embodies the fractured national consciousness that has become the reality in Gujarat today. Physically it is divided into two parts by the river Sabarmati. On the east, which is mostly a low-income area, is the historic walled city, the railway station and abandoned textile mills. This part of the city is densely populated with narrow alleys (sometimes as narrow as 3 feet), a mix of dilapidated historical structures and newer concrete additions, chaotic traffic, pollution, and shop displays competing for space on the streets (see figure 1.6). To the west, are the new upper middle-class residential areas and institutions complete with modern traffic planning (including designed building setbacks and sidewalks), glittering lights on corporate offices, and fancy high-tech billboards on multinational shop-fronts. This segregation based on class has transformed into another that is based on religious categories.\textsuperscript{75} The east part of the city still houses the small businesses and low-income populations, but these networks of narrow streets are

\textsuperscript{74} Varshney. 2002.
divided into Hindu and Muslim areas. Each zone is dotted with its own religious structures, smells and symbolic colors. After the 2002 and previous riots, these closely entwined neighborhoods have started constructing or raising already existing walls (or borders) around their zone as protection from the ‘other’ side. It is easy to see each layer of these brick walls that like a tree ring tells the story of every incidence of real or perceived violence in the city. The social and political tensions in the city are visibly embedded in the physical space.

The newer west side might appear more secular because of the lack of marked zones, but only if one does not realize that most of the rich in Gujarat are the upper-caste Hindus. The division is so strong that Muslim majority areas such as Juhapura, are often times referred to as ‘mini Pakistan,’ connoting ‘enemy area,’ and Hindu-dominant neighborhoods are actively constructing these ‘internal borders.’ Even autorikshaw (three wheeler taxis) drivers have different routes to the same destination based on whether they are Hindu or Muslim. During my stay in Ahmedabad there were specific areas that I was warned not to venture into because of these being ‘Pakistan’s ISI areas.’

Seven bridges span the river and connect the two sides of Ahmedabad city (see figure 1.3). I see the SEWA office locations on either side of the Ellisbridge, as symbolic of the connections that SEWA strives to create between the various fragmented parts of

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76 Autoriksaws, cars and buses belonging to Hindu owners are very clearly marked as such. An idol of Ganesha might be set on the front or Jai Sri Ram might be printed on the rear. For obvious reasons, Muslim vehicles are completely unmarked in terms of religious symbolism. I was told that it is dangerous even to have a poster of Amir Khan (a popular Bollywood Muslim hero) on one’s property.

77 Inter-Services Intelligence: Pakistan’s equivalent of the American CIA.
Ahmedabad (see figure 1.4). Their smaller units are spread across the city (and the state), predominantly in lower income neighborhoods (be it Hindu or Muslim dominated). These units cater to the health, education, literacy, insurance, banking, childcare and livelihood needs of SEWA members. The main offices on the two sides of the Ellisbridge are the central meeting points, and these were the offices where I met a majority of my respondents and conducted the interviews. In the east (historic side of the city) is what is referred to as the union building, consisting of the SEWA reception center, the trade union and cooperative offices and meeting halls. Upon exiting from the SEWA union building into a courtyard one enters a residential neighborhood where SEWA owns or rents several houses. In one of the houses, it operates the central dispensary for dispensing medicines and health supplies; in another they operate a childcare center. At various times one or the other of these spaces and the courtyard are used for different production and training activities such as block printing, weaving and so on. On the west (newer and modern) side of the river is the SEWA bank for poor women, the SEWA academy that conducts research on informal sector needs, and the SEWA video and media units. I volunteered in the SEWA academy during the summer of 2004 where I had access to SEWA’s library, digital documents, and videos made by SEWA women themselves. I ate lunch everyday in the ground floor of this building with the SEWA workers, sitting on the floor in a circle amidst a mix of poor vegetable vendors, non-traditionally educated rural organizers and post-doctoral researchers from Harvard. The juxtapositions of antipodal geographic and class-caste locations that were evident in the SEWA academy were also apparent in the SEWA bank and SEWA video offices. It is an
interesting picture to see traditionally dressed, uneducated in the conventional sense, and poor women working on hi-tech video editing equipment and computers in an office with marble floors. All SEWA staff, employees, members, leaders and customers are women and the only male presence that I saw was a young boy occasionally coming in to serve tea.  

Figure 1.3: Map of Ahmedabad City showing the location of the relief camps where SEWA worked. See figure 1.4 for detail of area 1.
Source: Adapted from google earth

78 I did wonder why SEWA women were accepting services from a young (probably around 10 yrs old) child and not considering that as a form of child exploitation. When I asked I was told that he is the son of the tea stall owner who operates his shop from just around the corner. The mother is a SEWA member and that SEWA likes to encourage business of its members. While I still had questions about the child’s educational needs and development I did not at that point probe any further (which I regret now – Oh! The perils of long-distance research).
Figure 1.4: Detail 1 showing the SEWA offices on both sides of the Ellisbridge
Source: Adapted from google earth.

Figure 1.5: A street vendors cart framing the SEWA bank building near Ellisbridge
Source: Jitesh Malik
Figure 1.6: Streets of Ahmedabad
Source: Jitesh Malik
Methodological perspectives

This study involves work at many scales. I needed to be able to have access to and an understanding of the woman’s own conceptualization of her seva, organizational (SEWA) approach to relief, SEWA’s interactions with other local, national and international organizations and also a broader historical contextualization of women’s role as national subjects in India. I needed to observe SEWA women as they went about their relief-work and community service and to investigate how multiple discourses of seva, nation, gender, relief among others come together to materialize in the particular space of relief camps. In order to do such work I needed to locate myself in and among the relief workers at Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Ethnography in relief: The researcher and the subject in fieldwork

I arrived in a devastated Kutch with notions of my respondents as ‘traditional’ women, powerless and rendered even more vulnerable in the aftermath of the series of disasters. I had read about the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched and about the powerful position of a ‘western’ scholar in a ‘third world’ setting. I must say I was in for a lot of surprises. Women in Kutch had faced many disasters and with their ingenuity and desire to sustain had emerged stronger from each one of them. Their hard lives had prepared them for challenges that might be difficult for an urban affluent person to face. Talking of appearances, they seemed well-built, strong and rugged women and I was short, used to urban comforts and six months into my pregnancy. The perceptions of vulnerability were immediately reversed. I was dependent on these women not just for answers to my questions but also for survival strategies in this particular context –which was home to them and alien to me.
My perceived vulnerability, especially the fact that I was pregnant, created unforeseen advantages for me as a researcher. I was welcomed, well almost forced into homes. Immediately groups of women gathered around me. Ah! I thought I didn’t have to work very hard towards getting respondents. But again, I was in for surprises. Before I could ask any of my questions I was fielding theirs, “what makes you come here in a pregnant state? Where is your husband, how did your family allow you to travel? Why is your nose not pierced?”—it was almost as if the gaze was reversed. I was the subject and they were the researchers. Sharing with them my stories, however, did help form a bond and created a space where research became a dialogue rather than a one-way interview.

Excerpts from my field notebooks, 2001

As my experience with fieldwork in Gujarat shows, the dynamics of ethnography are difficult to predict and often unfold in surprising ways during the research process. Here, I discuss my methodological framework to show how methodological and epistemological positions are intertwined and in my case continue to inform and define one another. To that end, I present a trajectory of my research process and the events that helped shape it. I then address issues of ‘location’ and argue that it, too, is forever shifting—one is never really inside or outside the field.

This inquiry explores struggles over the construction of gendered and national identities in the context of relief and rehabilitation efforts in Gujarat post-earthquake (2001) and post-ethnic conflict (2002). Published accounts and records of this relief effort focus on statistical and numerical analysis. Few studies go beyond the number of people killed/injured/rendered homeless/in relief camps, the number of relief camps, amount of rations delivered, number of rehabilitation units built etc. While such accounts are extremely important in providing a picture of the ‘effectiveness’ of the relief project, they do not help in understanding relief as a process that interacts
with other processes, such as identity construction, and globalization. The broad
generalizations derived from these figures, conceal the politics of gender, class, caste,
and religion inherent in the dissemination of relief materials and provisions.

Ethnography, with its emphasis on ‘participant-observation,’ can provide excellent
insights into the dynamics of processes such as relief and rehabilitation. Ethnography
is particularly suited to geographic analysis since “processes and meanings vary
across space, and are central to the transformation of landscapes, they are both place-
bound and place-making.” 79 Relief is a multiscalar process in which funding,
volunteers, and interactions cross international, national, and local boundaries all of
the time. In this research, ethnography provided the tools needed to understand these
flows and their meanings in local sites, and to argue against accounts of globalization
that conclude the loss of local agency. 80 Immersion in the field allowed me to study
the actions of various actors up close and make sense of these in relation to the
structural changes in Gujarat.

Arjun Appadurai argues that in an interconnected world, “the task of ethnography
now becomes the unraveling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality, as a lived
experience in a localized, deterritorialized world.” 81 Such discussions find resonance

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80 Manuel Castells and Zygmunt Bauman amongst others have argued that globalization has created
zones of ‘structural irrelevance’ such that the ‘local’ become spatially confined and powerless in
constructing and articulating their own meanings. See Castells, Manuel. 1996. The Rise of the Network
81 Appadurai, Arjun. 1991. “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and queries for a transnational anthropology in
Fox, R (Ed.). Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the present. Santa Fe. N. Mexico: School of
American Research Press.
in the discipline of geography as we seek to understand interscalar interactions in
place. An ethnographic study of the relief work in Gujarat provides an understanding
of the geographic processes involved and the ability to see relief as a phenomenon
that embodies interscalar interactions. Due to its rootedness in the field, I see
ethnography as uniquely suited to geographic research.

Field-work in ethnographic research includes observation of everyday and taken-for
granted routines and embodied knowledge(s) through long-term immersions in the
field, allowing the researcher to have face-to-face interactions and “listen to those
whom they study.”

As Susan Smith pointed out, choosing a methodology is more
than a philosophical or theoretical conundrum; it is a “self-conscious political act.”
Ethnography allows the opportunity to form relationships with one’s respondents and
to allow them to contribute to the direction of the research project. Often
ethnographic research is critiqued as emotional or not “objective” owing to the
relationships formed during fieldwork. However, feminist researchers have shown the
usefulness of such relationships in acquiring an understanding of complex social
processes.

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82 Gupta, Akhil and Ferguson, James. 1997. *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of
83 Smith, Susan. 2004. “Doing qualitative research: from interpretation to action” in Limb, Melanie and
The trajectory of ethnographic research

“Ethnography is more than a methodology.” Ethnographic research involves immersions in contexts and entails a bodily engagement with the particular spaces, at particular periods in time. Such immersions often lead to unforeseen directions in research. My research question and its subsequent direction follow a trajectory directly tied to what I saw, experienced, and recorded during my stay(s) in Gujarat. Ethnography as a research process does not merely draw upon my preexisting epistemological and theoretical positions but instead helps to define them. The first phase (2001-2002) of my study in Gujarat focused on traveling in the region (primarily Kutch, Baroda and Ahmedabad). This area, devastated by an earthquake, had become the center of an immense relief and resettlement effort. My initial response to the relief efforts stemmed from my training as an architect. My early journal notes abound with terms like “local aesthetics,” “concrete boxes,” “earthquake-resistant structures,” and so on. However, very soon the contents of these journals changed to include terms such as “local NGOs,” “international organizations,” “networking,” “on-the-ground relief workers,” “politics,” and so on. The experience of speaking with and observing people involved in the relief activities changed the focus of how I conceptualized “rehabilitation.” The relief process emerged as a complex web of human interactions and not just a method to cast earthquake-resistant structures. Government, media and other accounts of the relief efforts focused on broad depictions of the number of rehabilitation units built or the

amount of money spent. A closer contact with the region and the relief project, however, revealed dynamic political, economic, and cultural processes. Local inhabitants and activists went from being faceless receivers of global aid to agents that negotiated, resisted and constructed meaning(s) for their locale as they struggled to resettle themselves after the disaster. In my inquiry, I sought to understand the processes that accompanied these “constructions.” Stories presented contradictory accounts of relief efforts often pointing to the corruption and/or discrimination involved in the process. Some quotations from my field notebooks reveal the complexities of the scenario:

A Muslim couple in the Kutch district spoke as they leaned on their half-constructed Bhungi (mud house circular in shape):

Look at the houses they have built for the Hindu community. They have beautifully decorated mud plastering while we don’t even have basic doors. We were part of the same village and then they separated the two communities. The prime minister came to visit their village, to cut the ribbon. You must have seen it on TV. We had been part of the same village but nobody asked about us!

A Muslim family engaged in dying fabric:
Please take a tour of our house. It is so badly damaged from the earthquake. But we will not get any compensation from the government. The surveyors come and are required to classify the houses based on the amount of damage. Instead, you may say, they do it on the basis of how much bribe they get. We do not expect anything from the government. We rely on our Muslim society; they are funding a village reconstruction. But we are not sure if we want to move. This is where we work.

At a focus group with Hindu women who had stayed in the relief camp (here, the NGO involved claimed to have provided all essential services and food):
We did not receive anything, those in the other camps also got resettlement monies. We got nothing but empty talk, promises and lots of forms to fill out—a waste of time!
In addition, it is now well documented that many NGOs were linked to caste groups. As a result, even in the desperation of the earthquake lower castes were not allowed in many relief shelters.\footnote{Setalvad, Teesta. 2001. “Split Wide Open” in Communalism Combat. Sabrang Communication and Publishing Pvt. Ltd. February 2001.} An intense feeling of injustice, and an urge to ‘do something’ about such discriminatory practices in relief work, has helped to further define my research agenda of analytically understanding the social, political and economic interactions that surround relief.

Ethnographic research usually stretches over a considerable time. In the course of this time frame events occur that shape or alter the direction of research. On February 27, 2002, a week after my departure from Gujarat, a train carrying Hindutva activists (\textit{karsevaks}) back from the disputed temple site in Ayodhya was burnt. Fifty-eight people were killed—the majority of who were Hindus. Without an inquiry into the incident, the Muslim population was blamed and connections imagined between the ISI in Pakistan and the Muslims in India. Religious violence almost to the scale of genocide followed in which more than a thousand Muslims were killed throughout Gujarat and about 98,000 people were forced into relief camps. Those who survived spoke about destruction of homes and shops, gendered violence, and the burning of children. The Gujarat of 2002 was like a war zone.

The seeds of tensions between the two religious communities were visible much before the actual incident. My interactions with earthquake victims uncovered numerous stories of the uneven distribution of aid and relief, of caste- and religion-
segregated camps and of corrupt government officers. The extent to which the anti-Muslim sentiments had percolated among the citizenry became apparent when my husband waiting for an emergency flight out of riot-stricken Baroda overheard a group of college girls saying, “Why are the Muslims still here, we gave them Pakistan, they should go there”. The other girl replied much more vehemently, “Why let them go, we will burn them alive right here.” It seemed that the memory of the “partition of India” or “the rape of Mother India” is evoked every time there is a communal conflict and a process of othering occurs that seals off non-Hindus from the space of ‘Indian’ nationalism.88

Growing up in a middle-class Hindu family in India, I had been ignorant about the markings that accompany the minority population in their everyday lives. I was brought up on doses of songs and stories celebrating ‘unity in diversity’ through school, television, republic day parades and billboards. It was only much later as I became involved in college politics89 that it dawned upon me that I had been too wrapped up in my world of studying for competitive exams,90 and that I was unaware of the fiction of national unity. As part of the majority community and secure in my middle-class setting, I had not been cognizant enough of the class, caste, religious,

88 The media too reflected the widespread communal hatred. One of Ahmedabad’s renowned poet Rajendra Shah proclaimed publicly: “I don’t feel sad for whatever happened...These happenings don’t hold any significance for me...If the people of one community set the train ablaze in Godhra, were the people of the other community expected to tolerate it silently? Religion is not taught through preaching but through killing.” In article entitled ‘Jnanpith winner justifies riots’ published in The Times of India, August 11, 2003.
89 Babri Masjid (destruction of Muslim Mosque by Hindutva karsevaks) and the Mandal Commission (violent protests against affirmative action and reservations for lower castes) both happened in my early years of college
90 A phenomenon that holds in its sway most urban middle-class students in their last years of school in India.
and linguistic tensions that constitute India. However, by the time I graduated from college in Delhi, I felt I had acquired an altered ‘national’ consciousness that continues to affect my perspective today and this study.

I went back in the spring of 2004 to conduct a study of women involved in relief work in post-earthquake and post-Godhra Gujarat. By that time the official relief camps had closed down but rehabilitation sites such as SEWA’s shantipath kendras (centre for peace) were operational. I chose to focus on women’s description of their work in relief camps and observe them in action at the shantipath kendras. In recognition of the conflicting nationalisms in the region I chose to study the relief work of two organizations SEWA—a secular poor women’s organization and the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti—a Hindu nationalist middle-class women’s organization. I volunteered in SEWA’s office for the period of my stay and spent considerable amount of time in the evenings and weekends at the Samiti headquarters. As I interviewed women from both organizations, I was struck by how women from apparently opposite sides of the political spectrum understood their relief work similarly, as a form of selfless service—as seva. Drawing from my field experiences I decided to adopt the analytical lens of seva to understand the geographic and gendered process of relief in Gujarat. Moreover, in conversations with both SEWA and Samiti women and in discussions with long-time residents of Ahmedabad the centrality of Gandhi’s influence in the region (explicit in the case of SEWA or implicit in the case of Samiti) and especially in service projects became apparent.

91 Secular here does not translate as non-religious. Secular here refers to inclusivity, incorporating elements of all-religions.
Thereafter, Gandhi’s writings became an integral part of my theoretical forays into understanding relief, seva, nation and gender in Gujarat.

In the writing of this dissertation, I chose to focus only on SEWA. I have done so for the following reasons: 1) SEWA explicitly claims to be a Gandhian organization engaged in Gandhian seva, 2) in contrast to Samiti’s one-time relief effort, SEWA, as I read it, has always been doing relief work, so that providing relief has been an integral part of their existence for the past 30 years and 3) SEWA is a complex organization in terms of its scales of operation. While it goes in very deep at the local grassroots scale it also expands its networks globally through online forums and transnational organizing. SEWA is an independent organization in contrast with Samiti, which is affiliated and draws significantly upon RSS ideologies. A study of SEWA, whose name itself translates as selfless service, affords the possibility of understanding an alternate (SEWA’s) construction of a feminist and a national subjectivity in post-liberalization India. Moreover, restricting the study to SEWA allowed for a more manageable project as adding Samiti would have opened up many more areas of inquiry (*hindutva*, religious fundamentalism, BJP party politics) that were outside the scope of this dissertation. Towards the end of this dissertation, I speculate on how adding Samiti to the writing could have altered the direction of the project and articulate how I propose to do so in future writings.
The Politics of Location

My own location in this complex web contributed vastly to the conceptualization and understanding of this research. I drew heavily on my experiences of growing up in a Hindu family in India, as I attempted to analyze the field data. For this reason, this study is not just ethnography of relief work in Gujarat. Rather, it cuts across boundaries of space and time as my life stories intermingle with those of my respondents. The similarities and differences between my own experience and those of my respondents form the basis of this ethnographic account. The project helped me to understand myself as much as it provided an understanding of the complexities of the relief process. Therefore, I do not claim this ethnography to be ‘the’ true account of SEWA’s relief work in Gujarat. It is at best a partial story, framed and enriched by my biases, theories, histories, and geographies. The same can also be said about my respondents. Their explanations of themselves were also shifting and the version I recorded is specific to both the time and place of the interaction. The ethnographic details are thus relational, contingent both on the respondent and myself, in a particular setting, at a particular time. Yet they hold a key to meanings beyond just my respondents and me, as they tell the story of women who are redefining politics, the nation, and themselves.

I volunteered at the SEWA office for most part of my stay, and so I was physically present in their space, albeit always as an ‘outsider.’ SEWA managers interviewed me three times and read over my proposal many times before allowing me access to “their women.” They asked, “What is the benefit of your project to our poor women;
how can we be sure that their sentiments will not be hurt by your questions; how do you define nationalism?” Honestly, I was surprised by these questions since I had assumed that they were poor, uneducated women—they turned out to be politically savvy and informed. Much as I wanted to ‘belong’ in their space, the class difference was made apparent to me time and again. Further, these women were busy with their everyday routine of earning a livelihood and I was at best a diversion from their earning time, if not a threat to the solidarity they had so painstakingly constructed. Ideologically, I wanted to be one of them; in reality, I could never be one of them. Even as they tried to make me feel welcome, their well-meaning remarks highlighted the huge gap between the spaces each one of us occupied. As I sat down on the floor to interview a group of SEWA women, one would get up and start fanning me with an old newspaper, apologizing for the heat, or the power cut. Banuben, who was assigned as my ‘official SEWA guide’ followed me around everywhere; “so no discomfort would come my way.” Despite my repeated refusals to have her around she persisted. Part of the reason was that I was paying SEWA Rs. 150 per day (about $ 4.00), a fee they charge all researchers interviewing SEWA women. For numerous reasons there was always a wall between them and me that my constant endeavors were unable to break.

To summarize, ethnographic study involves close associations with the people one studies. How does one draw limits to or define the extent of relationships that develop with one’s respondents? How does one position oneself in situations where various aspects of one’s identity conflict and overlap with those of one’s respondents? Here, I
argue for a dynamic conception of positionality in which each step in the research process is a negotiation between the researcher and the researched. While I do claim to be a feminist I did not claim that position when I interacting with my Hindu nationalist friend and host. On the other hand, I made my feminist, activist position very clear while talking to SEWA women. Are these shifting identity claims unethical? Is it dishonest to negotiate positionalities? Perhaps. Perhaps even the working-class SEWA women were dealing with the same dilemmas. I do not have an answer to these questions. I struggled to experiment with methodologies that would enable a research project involving conflicting and contrasting identity claims in a conflict zone and yet not to lose touch with the lived experience of the working-class women in SEWA.

Ethnographic research is about ‘being somewhere,’ and allows as much for a deep understanding of the locale or phenomenon under study, as for facilitating an understanding of one’s self in relation to the subject of study. Ethnography is by nature an eclectic methodology that utilizes many different methods and techniques to construct a picture or story. Once I arrived in Ahmedabad, I was never really out of the ‘field’. It is difficult to say when I was doing research and when I was shopping in the amazing historical streets of the city. Reading the daily newspaper with my morning tea was as linked to the research process, as was initiating a deliberate conversation with an autorickshaw driver about the communalization of Gujarat. My understanding of the region, its people, the disasters, and the subsequent relief process is derived from numerous sources and any list of my data would be limited.
Nevertheless, I here outline some of the methods used and forms of data collected during my stay in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

My primary research methods included participant observation, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and documentation of oral histories of 20 women. I also did a content analysis of SEWA publications, newspaper archives (from 1999-2005) and street posters, embroidery motifs, and folk/activist songs, among other materials.

Participant observation. As the term suggests, participant observation entails the researcher’s participation in the respondent’s domain. In this sense participant observation has a definite spatial component to it and therefore it was critical to my study. Participant observation reveals the shifts in meanings and practices across spatial and temporal contexts. Insights gained through participant observation helped me to acquire an understanding of the gendered constructions of nationalistic rhetoric and its spatial manifestations as they play out in relief work. I volunteered for the duration of my stay in Ahmedabad (January-March 2004) at the SEWA office. I worked on project proposals, the organization of research conducted by the SEWA academy, and translation. While this work was not technically located at sites where relief and rehabilitation work was going on, this was the best way to use my expertise at SEWA. Volunteering at SEWA helped me to establish good relationships with SEWA women, learn about their daily lives, and have access to unpublished works in the SEWA office. For two reasons someone from the SEWA office always accompanied my visits to rehabilitation sites. First, this is SEWA policy; and second, some of the areas were considered unsafe. It was advisable for outsiders to be
accompanied by a local person. Furthermore, my presence also meant time-off from more important tasks, so that permission was required from the SEWA office. SEWA as an organization is very protective of the women they provide services to as some of them have suffered greatly in the calamities. There was an implicit control over the questions I was allowed to ask so that “no feelings would be hurt.” However, once I had been in the SEWA office for some time they were more comfortable in leaving me alone with some of my respondents, although such sessions were brief.

Figure 1.7: On the way to SEWA Academy. I had my breakfast at the corner stall everyday before reaching the SEWA office just around the corner.
Source: Jitesh Malik

*Focus groups.* Focus groups were my starting point in identifying and soliciting volunteers for an extended interaction that would lead to an exchange of oral histories and in-depth interviews. I conducted multiple sessions with three groups of women:
one with women from SEWA, one with women from Samiti, and one with women who had been living in relief camps. Focus groups provided me with an understanding of the group dynamics within these organizations. These played a key role in providing insights into the collective identity and imaginations of women in the two organizations and the geography of gender in the region. The focus groups with SEWA women took place in the SEWA union building and were voluntary. About 15 women attended at least part of the sessions. The focus group with women who had been living in relief camps was arranged by one of the SEWA workers and was held at a *shantipath kendra* (a center for peace) run by SEWA. Although my research does not address issues raised by the focus group with women who needed relief, it was important to incorporate their perspective as they resided at the receiving end of the relief process.

*In-depth interviews and oral histories.* I followed up the focus groups with in-depth interviews and life history sessions with 10 selected respondents who belonged to SEWA (another 10 belonged to Samiti). These sessions consisted primarily of open-ended questions, or conversation openers, to encourage respondents to talk about themselves and their experiences as members of their respective organizations, and as members of their community. “As one of the only means of retrieving the historical experience of non-elite people whose lives are not recorded in the historical documents, oral history has played a crucial role in the writing of women's history”\(^92\). Oral histories reveal connections between the inner and outer worlds and provide a

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bridge between individual biography and cultural processes. In this way they align themselves well to the second-wave feminist slogan “the personal is political.” Oral histories “help establish collective memories and imagined communities and they tell of the concerns of time and place.”

The participants were selected to represent the diversity of the organization. The participants in SEWA were from different caste groups and belonged to both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Although most were poor, two were now elected office bearers in SEWA and made a decent living. The diversity was also in terms of age and time period spent with SEWA and spanned from an 18-year-old granddaughter of an elder SEWA member to a 75-year-old senior leader. All interviews were conducted in Hindi peppered with Gujarati words. Sometimes women used English words to emphasize or clarify a particular aspect to me. Most sessions were conducted at the respondent’s work place. A few were conducted at their homes, a public park, or eatery.

People “tell their stories—or do not tell their stories- in conditions that are not necessarily of their own choosing within a circuit of power.” What is not spoken is as important as what is and needs to be considered as part of the politics embedded in the society being studied. By adopting a research design that simultaneously draws from personal observations, group interactions and interviews amongst other

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94 Ibid. (402).
methods, I attempt to tell a story that embodies the contradictions and complexities of Gandhian-inspired women’s relief work in post-liberalization Gujarat.

**Dissertation Organization**

This dissertation is organized so as to present the socio-spatial discourse of seva and its situated practice in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. I present seva as a gendered concept that works to define gendered national identities, of those who perform it, and for those whom it is performed. Seva occurs within the context of the family, the community, the nation and globally. The socio-spatial practice of seva is complex because it involves a multitude of actors with a multitude of discourses, from the state, non-state nationalists, NGO service providers, international service organizations and many more. Moreover, in post-liberalization India we see an increased ‘professionalization’ of this space of seva. This study of seva in post liberalization India is then simultaneously a study of the changing relationships of the various actors involved. Furthermore, the concept and practice of seva and Gandhi are intimately interlinked, especially in Gujarat and so a study of seva today is also a study of Gandhian action in post-liberalization Indian-State. In the first chapter, I familiarized the reader with these various dimensions of the project, as I introduced briefly SEWA the organization and situated my study in the socio-political scenario of Ahmedabad Gujarat. Towards the end I discussed the methodology that I adopted to undertake this research and the questions the research process raised for me.
In the second chapter, I utilize a geographic understanding of the productive aspects of the discourse of seva, and locality, to develop the historical and theoretical lens(es) that I use to frame my ethnography of SEWA’s relief work. I begin with presenting a brief historiography of the socio-spatial practice of seva—how and in what way did seva start to become part of political projects in the public sphere? How does seva at home appear similar to, or different from, seva in public space—and what implications does this have for gendered national identities? Using human geographic literature on the social construction of scale, I discuss how the socio-spatial practice of seva performed in local places constitutes the supposedly more powerful scales of the national and the global. Using literature on nationalism by postcolonial authors, I show the shifting relationship of the nation’s people to the state and civil society, thus outlining the field in which seva is performed. Using feminist literature, and Gandhian practice, I show how the discourse of seva is gendered in complex ways and can be both restraining and empowering for women and men. I present an ethnographic account of relationships forged within relief camps to argue that we need to look beyond the print media, census, maps, and the museum to understand how national identity is produced in multi-lingual and multi-cultural societies. I discuss the historic trajectory of seva in the context of disaster relief and in Gandhian political economy.

The third chapter is simultaneously a detailed introduction to the organization SEWA and it is also in this chapter that I show the centrality of relief work to SEWA’s identity and existence. Relief work described as seva, is not an isolated one-time activity that SEWA indulges in now and then. I argue that SEWA’s involvement in
relief produces SEWA ideologically as a working-class women’s organization, and numerically because each time there is a disaster and SEWA serves, their members increase. Following Pratt, I bring multiple discourses (SEWA as refuge, SEWA as mother’s home, SEWA’s secular Gandhian nation, women as more peaceful, all religions are one and so on) in relation with each other and pay close attention to the mutual construction of space and scale that accompanies these multiple descriptions of SEWA’s identity.

Chapter four is where I zoom into what really happens inside relief camps and relief sites, and what is the nature of relief that SEWA provides. The intent of this chapter is to present a ‘thick description’ of the relief process in order to see the spatial negotiations and the politics of scale construction that SEWA women engage in during relief work. In this chapter, I bring together stories of relief work, with the life stories of those that provide relief. My aim is to reveal the interconnectedness of women’s seva in the space of the family, community and the nation. I also highlight the particularities of SEWA’s relief work in terms of its responses to the changing nature of the state, and the influx of newer local, national, and international disaster relief organizations.

Here I juxtapose the idea of SEWA as working towards a feminist Gandhian nation in “post-liberalization” India, and of SEWA working as an extended arm of the Indian “developmental” state. I show the ways in which multiple subjectivities intersect in the performance of seva, the subjectivities of those that perform and those that
receive. This chapter thereby attempts to untangle the scalar complexities that underlie the local performance of seva, in a globalizing India.

Towards the end, I conclude that even as the socio-spatial performance of seva constructs gender and national identity, it does so in multiple and contradictory ways—and does not necessarily produce homogenous passive subjects. In fact, the study reveals how SEWA women draw their agency from spatially negotiating this gendered discourse of seva in order to work towards their vision of a Gandhian feminist nation.
CHAPTER TWO
Viewing Seva: Theoretical Lenses

Introduction

Our project of revaluing the local as a site of politics is not about “liberation” from subjection as such, but about creating new discourses that subject in different ways. 

Gibson-Graham\textsuperscript{95}

In challenging the local/global binary and in arguing for organizing communities around difference, Gibson-Graham are engaging in what I think is very much a Gandhian politics of neighborliness. They write, “Surely the project of constituting communities of tolerance and peaceful diversity cannot be shunned at this conjuncture. And the locality is one place to begin such a project.”\textsuperscript{96}

With a geographic understanding of the productive aspects of the discourse of seva and locality, I frame the historical and theoretical lens(es) that I use to present my ethnography of SEWA’s relief work. I begin with presenting a brief historiography of the socio-spatial practice of seva—how and in what way did seva start to become part of political projects in the public sphere? How does seva at home appear similar to, or different from, seva in public space—and what implications does this have for gendered national identities? I then go on to outlining my theoretical framework that combines a geographical understanding of the production of scale and place, a postcolonial understanding of the construction of the Indian nation and the Indian nation-state, through seva; a feminist understanding of the mutual construction of gender and the nation. Towards the end, I illustrate how SEWA utilizes some of the


\textsuperscript{96} Ibid. (52).
“fruits of liberalization” in order to gain spatial mobility and to construct its local community that is simultaneously national and arguably global. I show how SEWA’s seva in relief camps helps construct community—SEWA’s Gandhian nation. I argue that we need to pay attention to these localized sites in order to understand how the national and indeed the global are constructed in and through situated practices such as seva.

Seva: The concept

Popular understandings of seva

Arjun: Why one should serve others?
Krishna: One who controls the senses by a trained and purified mind and intellect, and engages the organs of action to selfless service, is superior, O Arjun. (3.07) Perform your obligatory duty, because working is indeed better than sitting idle. Even the maintenance of your body would be impossible without work. (3.08) Human beings are bound by work (Karm) that is not performed as a selfless service (Seva, Yajn). Therefore, O Arjun, becoming free from selfish attachment to the fruits of work, do your duty efficiently as a service to Me. (3.09)

Third chapter, Bhagwat Gita

The word seva derives from the Sanskrit root word seva, which translates as follows: to serve, wait or attend upon, honor, or worship. It is seen as “selfless service,” an offering to God, performed without attachment and with the attitude that “one is not the doer.” While seva can take many forms it is most often differentiated as bodily (tan), mentally (man) and materially (dhan). Historically, the allure of seva has mobilized large populations from across the religious spectrum in India to perform religious, national, and familial duties. Perhaps the best-known and most frequently evoked story about seva is that of Shravan Kumar, the ideal son:

During the reign of Dashratha, the father of Ram,98 Shravan Kumar a dutiful boy was committed to serving his parents. In order to fulfill his parents desire to visit religious sites he constructed a sling with bamboo and two baskets and carried them on his shoulders through thick forests on long journeys. One day as Shravan Kumar went to fetch water from the stream for his thirsty parents, an arrow (from King Dashrath’s bow—who mistook the sound for a deer drinking water) stuck him and he died.99

The story goes on to describe Dashrath’s apology to Shravan Kumar’s parents and the curse that they place on him—that he, too, will pine for his son in his old age.

However, the point here is to highlight the son’s seva towards his parents as an expected and respected social practice. Shravan Kumar as the ideal son is the center of many plays and stories that circulate in the Hindu private and public spaces in India. Gandhi too like most other Indians saw these plays and professed to have been influenced by them. His seva for his ailing father occupies a central place in his autobiography.

The discourse of seva is not just stories and plays. It is also an everyday reality for men and women as they strive to fulfill their assigned roles in Indian society.100 Women as daughters, daughter-in-laws, mothers, sisters and sometimes as lowly paid domestic workers (that are ‘just like members of the family’) perform seva by caring for the young and the elderly in the family. Men as sons are expected to serve the

98 Hindu God whose life story is narrated in the Hindu epic Ramayana. Ram is also the center of the Hindu-Muslim conflict over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhaya in the recent years. The Hindu nationalists claim the site of the Babri Masjid as the birthplace of Ram and insist on building a temple there. In 1992 thousands of Hindu activists (who called themselves karsevaks) from all over the country converged on the mosque and destroyed it. Nationwide Hindu-Muslim riots followed. In 2002 a train carrying karsevaks from the disputed site in Ayodhya was burnt and again intense violence against the Muslims followed, primarily in Gujarat. Ram seems to have become synonymous with Hindu nationalism.

99 Reconstructed from memory. Shravan’s Kumar story is repeatedly told to children by their parents, teachers and school books and I am reconstructing from the version I remember.

100 While I am well aware of the impossibility of the existence of a homogenous ‘Indian society’ I use the term deliberately here to highlight the ubiquity of seva’s power in all communities in India.
family by financially supporting their parents and serve the nation by joining the armed forces or government. Gendered assignments with regard to the socio-spatial practice of seva produce gendered subjects. Caring tasks like tending to the sick have come to be normalized as feminine seva, to be performed but not to be spoken about or rewarded. On the other hand, aggressive seva such as military service are considered masculine domains to be rewarded and proclaimed as heroic.101 Moreover, seva as a socio-spatial practice relies on boundaries of home and the world, public and private space, and inner and outer, to include, exclude, and categorize men’s and women’s seva.

It is important to note the hierarchy in terms of gender, age, and caste embedded in seva and the multiple forms and meanings of seva—the discourse of seva can be familial, religious, spiritual, national, humanitarian among other spheres. Seva within the family is constructed as ‘apolitical’, pure, performed out of love and a sense of duty. When one speaks of seva as a religious duty the image that comes to mind is that of a person from a lower caste serving food to a Brahmin. For devoted students, seva of the guru is held in high esteem. The image102 that comes to mind when one speaks of seva inside the home is that of a dutiful daughter-in-law massaging the feet of her mother-in-law. While a woman is required to be of service to her maternal or

101 Seva is a complex concept that relies on many social differences. I am indebted to Mrinalini Sinha for pointing out that seva has more recently become associated with a simplified gendered binary. While it is outside the scope of this project to trace this history, I attempt to address the way this binary plays out in post-liberalization India.

102 Thanks to popular media programs that portray idealized notions of patriarchal Indian (read upper-caste/class Hindu) families. Such as: Saas bhi kabhi bahu thi (Mother-in-law was at one time a daughter-in-law) a popular family drama set in Gujarat that has a never ending story and flashes in millions of TVs at 10.30 pm every night. During my second ethnographic visit to Gujarat in 2004 it was already being aired for the past four years and the end was nowhere in sight for this joint family saga.
husband’s family, a man being of service to his wife would be considered most inappropriate. On the other hand, for a son not to be inclined to serve his parents in their old age would be considered unacceptable. To complicate this further, a woman’s position in the hierarchy changes with the birth of a son, as then she will have the opportunity to be served by her son and daughter-in-law. The privileges associated with the gendered seva norms then add to the discrimination against the girl child, who is considered paraya dhan or somebody else’s property.

The word seva is used in different contexts with very different meanings and implications. Brahminical and upper-class legends often denote seva as demeaning, polluting, and menial.103 In popular understandings it also passes as employment under a master or the government. Statements such as “I am in government service,” implying that I am a government employee are common and denote both the idea of a permanent job but also the idea that remuneration is not the motive.104 The common association of the word seva with the humility expected of servants assigns a hierarchical and caste-based structure to the performance. It is important to pay attention to the location and context of where seva is performed. Seva in certain spaces, for specific purposes is considered one’s duty and path to salvation. So seva

103 For example seva in temples is often performed to make up for one’s sins. The act of seva often involves menial and demeaning tasks like cleaning shoes and helping build (building being associated with lower castes). See Srivatsan, R. 2006. “Concept of ‘seva’ and the ‘sevak’ in the Freedom Movement” in EPW 41:5.
104 See Watt, Carey. 2005. Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association, and Citizenship. Oxford University Press. New Delhi. Seva related to government service also has a shifting historical trajectory. The first shift is registered around the early 1900s and Watt quotes G.K Gokhale whom he calls the “Titan of social service: “A man in public service usually means a man who is an official. All that has to alter for our people now. The meaning of public service should be voluntary in the interest of our fellow beings.” (191) Instead government service became associated with self-interest and allegiance with the British. It can be argued that the meaning reversed again after Independence in the post-colonial State where government service could be equated with public service.
within the family, for one’s community, nation, or god is held in high esteem while seva performed as a servant is often considered the terrain of the ‘lower castes’ or viewed as a way of making up for one’s sins. Moreover, the same tasks performed in different geographic contexts may be understood differently – as labor, or as seva. To elaborate, the manual labor related to the construction of buildings is often considered to be the job of lower-castes and would be viewed as polluting by the upper-castes. However, if the geographical context of construction labor is a temple then such a work assumes the title of *karseva*—or the pure task of offering one’s labor to god. Seva in its multiple meanings emerges as a set of socio-spatial practices that work with and create structures of caste, gender, community, and the nation.

*An brief historiography of seva*

The discourse surrounding seva is not just spatially produced but is also historically contingent and has assumed varying forms based on the socio-political interests of the time. While seva is considered a purely personal act, driven by an inner desire and with no selfish motives, it is precisely these understandings of seva that have been used to channel seva for political purposes.

In Gujarat, the Swaminarayan tradition of service to humanity has a long history that can be traced back to the Vaishnavite practices from the pre-colonial times. During the famine of 1813-1814 the Swaminarayans performed seva work by providing relief. Anthony Watt in his book *Serving the Nation* shows how indigenous practices

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and vocabulary of seva, bhakti (devotion), sannyas (renunciation of the world) and dharma (duty) interacted with western notions of citizenship, nationalism, and social service in the first two decades of the twentieth century to produce a newer conception of organized and institutionalized seva. Watt argues that “at the turn of the twentieth century, the concept of seva, was at one level changing from acts connoting individual pious acts of homage, worship, and service to a deity or guru, towards a more worldly service of society mediated by social service organizations.” By the 1920s, numerous organizations using the terms seva and sevak had been established throughout India: Seva Sadan, Bhil Seva Mandal, Gandhi Seva Sangh, and the Servants of India Society (SIS) also changed its name to Hind Sevak Samaj. Watt contends that the associational life that developed around the first two decades of the twentieth century, with voluntary and social service organizations, constituted an integral part of nation building, more so than the explicitly political national parties. These organizations created spaces where a large number of people including women and youth were able to enter public life. Watt particularly mentions the role of these service organizations in large-scale relief efforts and views them as sites where “social solidarities” were constructed. Relief efforts during famine or plague forged new links between urban and rural areas of the country. Supplementing Anderson’s discussion of the imagined community through print capitalism, Watt argues that the Indian nation was imagined through “transregional personal interactions mediated through associational spaces.” Among other forms, social seva too provided the

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108 Ibid. (7).
opportunity for the construction of such associational spaces that would then be critical sites for the production of the Indian nation.

Much of the seva work during the early part of the twentieth century took place in melas (fairs) and during times of famine, plague, or influenza. At the melas most notably the Haridwar Kumbh mela (1915) and the Allahbad Kumbh mela (1918), volunteers from seva organizations established first-aid booths, ambulance services, services for lost pilgrims, provided water to train passengers, and helped the elderly carry their luggage. In times of disaster and epidemics, seva workers, from the by now numerous seva samitis and sabhas, provided traveling dispensaries and disposed of the dead bodies with appropriate rituals irrespective of caste, class, or religion.¹⁰⁹

R. Srivastan provides an excellent review of the notion(s) of seva during the freedom struggle. Srivastan’s review is particularly relevant for understanding the relationship of seva to the formulation of the Indian nation and civil society with its particular characteristics. As both Srivastan and Watt note, around the 1900's a shift occurred in the meaning of seva and it began to connote selfless work towards uplifting of the “depressed classes” performed primarily by an elite group of political workers. Srivastan traces this development to the formation of the SIS in 1905 that called for a “missionary attitude,” and a “spiritualization of public work” stressing “liberal and secular ideas.” This was a departure from conventional notions of seva as it reversed the hierarchy between the performers of seva and those served. The SIS saw themselves as ascetic leaders who perform selfless service for solving the problem of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. (115).
India’s “backwardness.” Srivastan further argues that the concept of seva was instrumental in consolidating an upper-caste Hindu hegemony within the Congress as social service work in the 1900s was primarily undertaken by urban elites from the higher castes and was mostly directed towards those with lower social status.

Watt on the other hand asserts that the novelty of the associational groups related to seva in the early twentieth century lay in their institutional depth, the mixing of caste and class groups involved, the introduction of women (in a limited sense), and most importantly in the ability for these groups to work together on a transregional scale. Both Srivastan and Watt however stress seva as a form of citizen activism while also highlighting that seva then appears as a performance integral to the formation of the nation and its citizens. In many ways, the national community imagined and created through seva incorporated diverse populations into a homogenous whole, thereby masking the hierarchies, while retaining the hegemony of the elite.

In 1918 Gandhi presided over the first All India Social Service Conference. The draft constitution of Gandhi’s ashram in Ahmedabad (today known as the Sabarmati Ashram) lists possible names for the Ashram, one of them being Sevamandir, pointing to the centrality of seva in Gandhian thought. Gandhi saw seva as “constructive work” that was necessary in preparation for swaraj or self-rule. However, for Gandhi seva was not about masking of hierarchies or creating a homogeneous community, rather seva for Gandhi was a way to relate to those that
were weaker than oneself. While reformers\textsuperscript{110} before Gandhi initiated the expansion of seva beyond the home and into the public sphere, Gandhi is credited with making seva central to both Hindu religion and to anti-colonial politics.\textsuperscript{111} According to Gandhi true religion lay in actively serving others and that this was the only path to spiritual realization of one’s self. However, according to Gandhi, this could not be done merely within the confines of one’s home, since politics was “all pervasive.”\textsuperscript{112}

Gandhi claimed that the concept of seva varied according to time and place and at the moment, considering India’s social situation, poverty, and “moral degeneration,” the task was to remove these problems. He called for a “spiritualization of politics,”\textsuperscript{113} arguing that one cannot engage in service without engaging with politics or vice versa. Political activity, according to Gandhi, should not be confined to the state, and the fact that it had been was a reflection of the moral and social degeneration of the Indian citizenry. Regeneration was only possible if politics was removed from the state and non-coercive modes of social administration were developed. Gandhi wrote:

In this age, only political sannyasis can fulfill and adorn the ideal of sannyasa; others will more likely than not disgrace the sannyasa’s saffron garb. No Indian who aspires to follow the way of true religion can afford to remain aloof from politics. In other words, one who aspires a truly religious life cannot fail to undertake public service as his mission, and we are today so much caught up in the political machine that service of the people is impossible without taking part in politics.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{110} Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission, SIS among others. See Watt. 2005
\textsuperscript{112} At the same time Gandhi also assigned a political meaning to work done at home, specially related to spinning. Gandhi’s political seva had an immense affect on the gender norms of the day and enabled many women to come out into the streets and participate in anti-colonial politics.
\textsuperscript{113} Gandhi borrowed the term “spiritualization of politics” from his ‘political Guru’ Gokhale.
Gandhian seva drew connections between religion, nation, governance and social reproduction, and through Gandhi’s use of religious and social imagery, became popular among the masses. In many ways, Gandhi’s articulation of the discourse of seva helped bring together disparate parts of the region into a conception of unified India. Gandhi envisioned India as built on the foundations of a “village swaraj,” where local autonomy was more important than centralized power. According to the Gandhian vision, the Indian National Congress needed to dissolve after political independence from the British was achieved, and to transform itself into the Lok Seva Sangh (people’s service organization). However, things took a different turn.

Following independence in 1947, the Indian national congress assumed leadership of the newly formed India. The postcolonial state’s keenness to fashion a modern democratic country and put it on the path to “development” led to an increased interest in social welfare and service programs. The postcolonial development state took over many of the domains of social service and relief work that had previously been the fields of voluntary organizations. In this phase, from 1947-1970, social welfare work towards a modern developed India became institutionalized to a large extent within the postcolonial state, leaving little room for autonomy of the voluntary sector. Watt describes the irony: “Independence at the state level meant little autonomy in civil society.” Paradoxically, even the Gandhian NGOs and programs based on aspects of Gandhian philosophy such as the Khadi and Village Industries

Commission (KVIC) came to be supported largely through government funds. The implications of Gandhian seva being institutionalized in state sponsored organizations were tragic in some ways and resulted in many of Gandhi’s ideas becoming mere rituals, such as singing daily prayers without there being a freedom to question.\textsuperscript{117} Numerous service organizations were formed as delivery organizations or as what Korten\textsuperscript{118} refers to as “public service contractors.”

The state’s entry into the domain of social service was not without resistance and several service organizations objected to the formation of government sponsored social service organizations.\textsuperscript{119} Another shift in the domain of seva happened around the 1970s when an era of populist politics began, which manifested themselves in break-up of the Congress party. A faction of party members attempted to establish direct contact with people (\textit{garibi hatao} or remove poverty slogans) and “pro-people” political strategies including nationalization of banks were initiated.\textsuperscript{120} In 1974, Gujarat and the rest of the country witnessed political unrest, sparked by a student protest over rising prices. The Indira Gandhi led government declared internal emergency in a highly autocratic move. Despite a strong affiliation with the Congress party, the Gandhian NGOs in Gujarat protested publicly and many Gandhian leaders were arrested.

\textsuperscript{117} Iyengar, Sudharshan. 2000. “Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Development of Gujarat” in \textit{EPW} 35:36.
\textsuperscript{119} The government created the Bharat Sevak Samaj whose object was “national regeneration through social service and self-help.” Nehru became the president of this organization and 10 million rupees were allocated for its work. Already existing service organizations such as Servants of India Society, Ramakrishna Mission, Seva Samiti and the Servants of the People Society all argued against the creation of a government sponsored organization that took the place of independent already existing social service organizations (Watt 2005).
\textsuperscript{120} For a detailed discussion see Iyengar. 2000.
During the 1980s, numerous controversies over developmental projects came to light such as the Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada and many Gandhian NGOs became publicly critical of state-controlled developmental practices. As a consequence of the political shifts, the post-1970s period is also marked by the springing up of numerous autonomous grassroots organizations (SEWA became an autonomous organization in this time-period). Dissatisfied with the inability of the Indian state to keep its promises numerous organizations with concerns ranging from very local particular issues, to broad globally popular ones sprung up. The discontent also created a space for Hindu nationalist organizations like the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (1926) leading to the rise of Hindu nationalist parties that gained political power in 1992.

_SEva in liberalizing India_

Although foreign aid for development-related organizations has been coming into India since independence, the flows of foreign capital and of international organizations have increased manifold in the 1990s. This is attributed to the ease of foreign exchange regulations related to the so-called “opening up” of the Indian economy that characterizes the structural adjustment reforms undertaken by the Indian government since the 1990s. The void left by the state pulling out of many of its social security services is being filled by local, national, and international service organizations.121 Alongside the cultural transformations accompanying globalization

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include changes in the joint or extended family systems, the consolidation of the Indian middle-class and an increased discourse of the ‘liberated’ woman.\textsuperscript{122} An easy mobility and an increased affluence, especially in middle-class families, has resulted in disconnectedness and distancing (often related to international immigration). The combined effect of the changes at the scale of the state and the family have created spaces where seva has become a part of the professionalized sector, with NGOs encompassing all fields ranging from long-term elder care to emergency disaster relief.

The transformation of seva from a personally motivated act to an institutionalized and professionalized job is accompanied by shifts in other domains of the nation-state. For example, Sudharshan Iyenger has noted that in the recent years in Gujarat the language of communication in the NGO sector has changed from Gujarati to English.\textsuperscript{123} Over the years the internal culture of the seva samitis and NGOs has also changed from more informal centers driven by a spirit of volunteerism to formal, professionalized offices with hugely increased amounts of “buildings, staff and funds.”\textsuperscript{124} In a recent review of the state of NGOs in India the authors write, “The primary concern is not the people but the existence of the organization and an uninterrupted supply of grants and funds.”\textsuperscript{125} Iyenger alleges that the professional approach appears to be a way to conceal the donor’s agenda. Other discussions on the

\textsuperscript{123} Iyenger. 2000.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid. (11).
new professionalized seva organizations point to the new “experts,” who get to travel around the world and ultimately lose touch with the grassroots reality.\footnote{Hiraway, Indira. 1995. “Selective Development and Widening Disparities in Gujarat” in \textit{EPW} 30: 41-42.}

Co-existent with the so called detached seva of the newly emerging NGOs is the religious seva for a Hindu nation. A multitude of organizations that seek to rebuild India as a Hindu nation perform on-the-ground seva with the same ‘missionary zeal’ as the SIS did in the twentieth century. Alongside the more explicitly fundamentalist Hindu Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),\footnote{The seva of the RSS during times of disaster relief has been hailed as exemplary, in newspapers, historically (especially during partition of British India) and in the recent disasters in Gujarat.} there exist organizations like the Hindu Seva Pratishthna (HSP) which proclaims itself as a movement for social change and prepares sevavratis to follow ‘seva not as a profession, but as a way of life.’ The HSP also conducts correspondence classes on the ‘Hindu way of life.’ The large influx of foreign capital into Gujarat as a consequence of liberalization—and the disasters, has come under scrutiny for being channeled into projects of ‘Hinduization.’\footnote{See Chatterjee, Angana. 2002. “Unholy Alliance: The India Development Fund and Hindutva” in \textit{Dissident Voice}. December, 2002. Also see \textit{A Foreign Exchange of Hate}. November 2002. A report published online, jointly by the French based South Asia Citizens Web and the India based Sabrang Communications. http://www.stopfundinghate.org/sacw/index.html (accessed January 14, 2007).}

On the other hand, it has also been argued that the retreat of the centralized state has created an opening for Gandhian organizations and an opportunity to build the nation in the way Gandhi imagined it. Rudolph and Rudolph (2006) argue that Gandhi’s call to the Congress to leave political power and serve is happening now, as NGOs are
displacing governmental bureaucracies. The IT revolution and the promise of decentralization associated with Internet technologies, further enables the move towards Gandhi’s “village swaraj.” Madhu Kishwar also argues that the post 1990s liberalization, resulting in the reduction of the top-heavy powers has the potential to make the nation more democratic, in a Gandhian way. Kishwar calls for an end to the central state’s “license-quota-raid raj” and asserts that the problem is not economic liberalization (as many anti-globalization activists claim) but rather it is due to the economic reforms that have not gone far enough to reach the poor. Ela Bhatt in her book on SEWA women also articulates a similar belief, and argues for a disbanding of the “permit-quota-license raj.” She maintains that decentralization is in the interest of the nation. However, such a decentralization should not merely be in terms of political power but also economic power. Bhatt warns, “decentralized political power with centralized economic power can be a dangerous mix.” It is these complex changes in the political and economic structures that SEWA women engage with as it they immerse themselves in their seva, amidst local and national government structures and local, national, and international organizations in Gujarat.

131 Bhatt. 2006.
Seva: Conclusions

My purpose in presenting this brief timeline of the dynamics of seva in Indian history was to highlight three points that are central to my study of relief in Gujarat. First, I wished to emphasize the gendered dynamics of seva that is delineated spatially. Service tasks inside the house or those related to the non-remunerative tasks related to caring for family members generally fall on the women, while those outside the house, such as providing financially for one’s parents, or those related to serving in the military fall on the men. While men’s seva is often spoken about, hailed amidst community members, and rewarded in national ceremonies; women’s seva is rendered invisible as it is naturalized in her “inherently self-sacrificing” nature.

This gendered dynamics is further reinforced as seva or the service sector is professionalized in the form of NGOs. Often women are seen as naturalized providers of seva and expected to work voluntarily, while more often than not men form the ranks of “experts” who travel the world. On the other hand, Gandhian politics complicates this spatial divide by making prominent women’s seva in public space.

Second, I highlight the role of seva as a technology of governance through which the ‘Indian nation’ is imagined. In all phases of India’s development seva is seen as a project for nation-building directed towards “upliftment” of the “backward classes” or towards “development” of a “modern” India and so on. I also emphasize the caste and class divisions that underscored the performance and receipt of seva. The project of nation-building is a contested and complex one and my ethnography of the
involvement of a working-class women’s organization in relief reveals the role of on-the-ground women’s seva as central to this project.

Third, I conclude this discussion of seva by pointing to the spatial and scalar dynamics that have in the past and are now (re)creating networks of power within which the NGOs and service organizations act. However, the NGOs are not merely affected by these power networks, but constantly seek to tangle and untangle them in complicated ways. For example, as colonial encounters altered the discourse of seva in the early 1900s, so too now we see a complex transformation as forces of globalization and of increased religious nationalism intersect with seva in relief work. In this study, I address the spaces and scales produced, and used, as SEWA goes about conducting relief work in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

**Scales of seva**

Seva has transitioned from being a performance usually located within the confines of the home or one’s ‘local’ community, to becoming a global phenomenon. Seva has also transitioned from being primarily associated with selflessness, volunteerism, and a personal quest, to becoming the job of professionals in the ‘not-for-profit’ and sometimes ‘for-profit’ organizations. There are contradictory perspectives on the effects of professionalization on seva. On the one hand, this professionalization has been seen as a way to be better organized and efficient. On the other hand, this professionalization has been critiqued as changing the focus of NGOs from seva for
the people, to management of their own resources, employees and funds. A recent book reviewing NGOs in India states, “Voluntarism is now being likened to comfortable living, money, and a secure job. The leaders live in palatial houses and have become jet-setters. The hallmarks of voluntarism—austerity and simplicity are jettisoned.” Within NGOs themselves there exists a hierarchy of sorts, with the English-speaking managers occupying the well-paid office jobs and those educated in the vernacular-medium working as lowly paid on-the-ground workers.

In SEWA, too, such tensions exist, although a conscious effort is made on the part of the senior leaders to ensure some form of equality. Meeraben, a SEWA employee, who has a graduate degree but her education has been in Gujarati, complained to me about the higher pay of the managers, who sit in air-conditioned offices and still take all the credit for the work. While the organizers, Meeraben contends, many of them unpaid, go about in the Ahmedabad heat “doing the real work.”

SEWA has recognized this sentiment and has established policies to mitigate such problems. For example, only working-class women can now be elected members of the executive council. SEWA has initiated an internal ‘Exposure Dialogue Program’

134 My experience with SEWA too seconds this sentiment. It took me two months of constant pleading with a SEWA academy manager to be allowed to conduct my first interview. While a large part of this delay has to do with the concern SEWA has for the safety of its members and its image, there is also the fact that SEWA today is a very large organization. Any large organization has the potential to become like a bureaucracy, almost like a microstate. There are procedures set up, documentations required and a hierarchy to be respected. My request for interviews had to be approved by many different levels within SEWA and I was interviewed many times before permission was given. As the manager for each section controls the operations in that particular section the workers do not always get a direct access to SEWA leadership and many feel that their seva then is not being appreciated.
(EDP)\textsuperscript{135} in which SEWA managers are encouraged to go live with the poor self-employed women for a few days and participate in their daily routine. SEWA managers claim that this program helps them retain their connection to the grassroots; a connection they assert is lost with English education and upward class mobility—a trend they have noticed in all other seva providers in the region.

During the three months of riot-relief in 2002, SEWA women claimed to have used these connections as they conducted their relief work. From the poor women in the affected neighborhoods to the elected leader of the municipal corporation, from the policemen on the street to Prime Minister Vajpayee, from the doctor in the International Red Cross to the supplier of old fabric in the wholesale market—everyone knew SEWA. This, according to SEWA workers, made relief work very easy for them. The connections also situate SEWA at a very important junction—that of the local and the national and the global—all at the same time. They can claim to be an organization that has grown from the grassroots, has acquired a national presence and is reputed internationally. In doing seva for the local women in Gujarat, SEWA claims to be contributing to national development and at the same time, to be working for working-class women all over the world.

SEWA’s work provides an insight into how scale can be conceptualized within Gandhian politics, which also provides an important critique to an understanding of scale as discrete entities. Gandhi wrote:

\textsuperscript{135} This is modeled on their existing EDP for outsiders, such as policy makers, ILO and WB representatives, researchers and so on who aim to gain a better understanding of the day to day struggles of the self-employed women.
As with the individual, so with society. A village is but one group of individuals and a world, as I see it, is one vast village and mankind one family. The various functions in the human body have their parallel in the corporate life of society. What I have said about inner and outer cleanliness of the individual, then applies to the whole society.\textsuperscript{136}

While working towards building a nation, Gandhi also outlined the roles and place for individuals—not as separate from the nation but as constituent of it. While imagining his nation he also imagined the world and in doing so, Gandhi was able to draw connections between the micro politics of the body and the political economy of the nation and the world. Gandhian scalar politics was simultaneously a politics of construction (of the self and of the nation), and of resistance (against the colonial state and against ‘problems’ within oneself). A somewhat similar dynamics dominates the world of seva today where one the one hand, ‘local’ NGOs articulate a discourse of development (of the nation), and on the other hand, engage in a politics of simultaneous cooperation and resistance with actors at other scales (the state and the global). In all of these articulations there is a manipulation and a construction of scale and place in the process.

Geographers have long engaged in articulating and debating these scalar relationships. However, where most recent geographic discussion on scale converges is the notion of scale as not an “ontologically given category,” but as contingent upon “tensions that exist between structural forces and the practices of human agents.”\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG) 78. Delhi: Publications Division of the Government of India. (320-321). CWMG is available in CD format and includes 100 volumes of Gandhi’s writings spanning 1888-1948.
Such a conception becomes important as it leads to the understanding of scale as social construct, reflective of social relations, or more appropriately produced by these relations. Scalar interactions are productive of, and are themselves products of, the socio-spatial dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment. Within relief work, the imagination of a particular scale of praxis as local, national, or global, tells the story of, and in turn produces, certain conceptions of hierarchy, power, and social relationships. So when the SEWA women work at the global scale and define themselves as grassroots, or when they act locally and articulate their local seva in the language of national development—they are acting strategically by assigning a certain scale to their discourse. Such strategic deployment of scales of praxis, and the movement across scales allows them to “take advantage of resources at one scale to overcome the constraints encountered at different scales.”

Moreover, in attempting to make sense of relief work in post-liberalized India, a geographic understanding of the ways in which scale and place is constructed and utilized, helps to better conceptualize the interactions between the retracting state, the encroaching global, and the (re)forming national. The construction of identity, place and scale are all mutually produced in and through the performance of seva. Actors define place and scale as they move between, across, and over scales to claim resources, overcome barriers, and project identity. SEWA workers in relief camps

do seva and claim it as ‘local,’ for their community and their nation– and by this very act they produce the relief camps as precisely this national community.\textsuperscript{141}

In the context of this dissertation, particularly relevant is Gibson-Graham’s work on challenging the local-global binary. Gibson-Garham argue that by constructing the global as the scale which dominates the political and economic life of the local, we tend to create an image of the global as all powerful, on the move, and an agent of change, while the local appears as stagnant, subordinate, and a site of change. Such constructed dualisms, they argue, do not leave any room for transformative politics and restrict our view of the multiple avenues through which neoliberalism could be challenged. In the scalar politics of SEWA, which claims to be a local ‘grassroots’ organization, one sees a tremendous engagement with, and an attempt to, transform political and economic structures at the national and global scales. SEWA’s example clearly highlights the power of the local in affecting change at other, supposedly more powerful scales. Moreover, in attempting to read SEWA’s Gandhian nation through Gibson-Graham, it is important to point out that we are not talking about a reversal of the binary but a negation of any dualistic relationship. Seva, according to a Gandhian logic, at the level of locality, is seva for the nation, and indeed for the global community. This seva at the locality produces community, not just locally but also

\textsuperscript{141} Here I use ‘production’ in the sense used in Judith Butler’s discussion of identity being produced by the very act of its performance – it is the same with scale and place
nationally and globally. An analysis of SEWA’s seva as a socio-spatial practice helps comprehend the complex dynamics of the social construction of scale.\textsuperscript{142}

A similar challenge to the supposedly more powerful global scale of Capital is issued by Andrew Herod’s work on economic landscapes of labor unions. He argues that labor unions also are, or can be, powerful agents as they use geographic scale to strengthen their positions and bargaining power. While this study is not a study of SEWA’s union work, it is nevertheless important to point out that SEWA as a union does use to its advantage, its cross-border organizing and web-based organizing in order to increase the power of its poor (local) working-class women. The linkages that SEWA forms as a result of its union activity also come in handy during times of disaster relief. SEWA women have often interacted with their partners in Turkey to exchange notes on earthquake relief. These linkages help define SEWA as simultaneously a local, national and global actor—one that exists in, works at, and produces place as multi-scalar.

Melissa Wright and Andrew Herod point out in their discussion of the ‘scales of praxis,’ how geographers have discussed political struggles as engaging in “up-scaling” or “scalar jumping.” They call for more careful attention to the dynamics of scalar shifts as “the jump is not always unidirectional, as groups move back and forth

\textsuperscript{142} Marston (2000) has argued that the emphasis on capitalist production within the literature on scale in human geography fails to adequately address the complexity behind the social construction of scale—which is accompanied by other processes as well (besides capitalist production) – such as social reproduction and consumption.
through a constant negotiation of the scales of vision, action and solidarity.”¹⁴³ What also needs to be kept in mind is that these scalar shifts are not merely strategic maneuvers on the part of organizations like SEWA to gain access to political resources, but they end up producing particular kinds of local, national and global subjectivities.

Last, the work of Miranda Joseph provides a critical reading of the productive aspects of the non-profit sector.¹⁴⁴ She goes beyond the debate on NGO/state relationship wherein on the one hand NGOs have been recognized as a potential for alternative development,¹⁴⁵ and on the other hand they have been critiqued as “‘Ideological State Aparatuse’s that generate individual and communal subjectivity for capitalism.”¹⁴⁶ Joseph reveals volunteerism as a site for the construction of a multiplicity of social relations and identities that engage in complex ways with local and global discourses of Capital. She draws attention to the construction of subjectivities of both—those that engage in service “voluntarily,” and those for whom this service is a site of “becoming and an incorporation that they do not control.” While I do find Joseph’s discussion of volunteerism as productive of identities and communities useful, I am however wary of the putting together of all forms of community and critiquing them as equally productive of capitalism.

¹⁴⁴ Joseph, Miranda. 2002. Against the Romance of Community. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Of particular relevance to this study is the third chapter, “Not for Profit? Voluntary Association and the Willing Subject.”
¹⁴⁶ Term first used by Althusser, Louis in 1971. This perspective is also present in the neo-Marxist discussions of how state power is maintained through these NGOs.
As I will show in my ethnographic story of Abhaben and Ameenaben later in this chapter, the performance of seva is productive of a sense of community, a local as well as national community. However, to characterize seva—selfless service, as contributing to a global capitalist economy is to create a conceptual block to any kind of alternative to capitalism. This is true, and Joseph discusses that such voluntary work rests largely on the unremunerated work of the women, and helps support the global capitalist economy (much in the same way as women’s household labor does). But I also argue that this does not mean that the women performing seva have become victims of capitalism or of patriarchal community. On the other hand, I argue that through the socio-spatial discourse of seva, precisely because of the selflessness and moral power associated with it, women are enabled as powerful agents in shaping their vision of the community—in this case SEWA’s Gandhian nation.

**Postcolonial seva: Producing the self, the nation and the State**

The performance of seva is productive: it is productive of both the national subject and the nation. However, as a socio-spatial practice, seva is a contested terrain and has assumed various different formulations over the course of Indian history. The performers of seva in the anti-colonial movement sought to create a shared community, a nation, and later an independent Indian nation-state. Things changed in the postcolonial period when the state itself assumed the role of ‘maibaap’ or the ‘annadata’—the caretaker and provider for the people.
The project of nation-building cannot be removed from the move towards governmentalization, for “nations cannot just be imagined… 'they need to be instituted to produce, reproduce and regulate the body politic.’” Many scholars of nationalism have discussed the nation and the state as separate entities, with one lying predominantly in the cultural domain of people’s imagination, while the other is primarily in the politician domain of governmental rationality and control. This is not to say that the two spheres are mutually exclusive—there are many overlaps, intersections and connections.

Partha Chatterjee argues that most people in India do not constitute civil society as they are far removed from this domain and their relationship with civil society is defined through pedagogy rather than through free association. This, Chatterjee contends, is not to say that those not constituting the civil society do not engage in a political relationship with the state. Chatterjee draws upon Michele Foucault’s work to illustrate this relationship. Foucault’s conception of “population” as a site where governmental technologies are exercised, lays the foundation of Chatterjee’s conception of the “political society” as the domain where “several mediations are carried out.” The relationship of the post-colonial developmental state to this political society is constituted through the state’s function of welfare.

Through projects related to welfare, like the service provided during times of disaster relief, the state and the civil society bring the populations into the imaginings of the Indian nation-state. Through pedagogical ventures that accompany relief and welfare, the state and civil society work in tandem with each other, to constitute a subject for the Indian nation-state. Since the state and the civil society in this case are seen as partners, the populations often understand the welfare and service to be provided by the state. This is the case to a large extent even today. My conversations with people in need of relief, or waiting for relief, revealed a strong perception of the state as the ‘maibaap,’ especially in the context of earthquake relief. Though there existed a range of opinions, from the relief effort being a well managed one, to that of it being corrupt, or biased, or inadequate — central to all these conversations was the idea that the state was solely responsible for providing relief to its people. While most of the on-the-ground work in relief today is conducted by local NGOs and volunteers, with a significant amount of funding coming in from international sources, still, the state is perceived as the one responsible for relief, and the major relief provider.

But the scene is not so simple. My ethnography of SEWA revealed that this terrain of seva involving the relationship between the state, the service providers, and the populations, is being (re)imagined and reconstructed in complex and contradictory ways. Globalization, specifically the post-1990s liberalization of the Indian economy, the influx of foreign funds and actors, the emergence and increasing popularity of numerous identity-based service groups, and the simultaneous privatization of the
state’s public service responsibilities, including disaster relief, are to a large extent changing the landscape of public seva in India.

The 1990s marked a sharp departure from the Nehruvian developmental state to a liberalized decentralized notion of the state. Madhu Kishwar\textsuperscript{149} remarked, and SEWA too professes, that while the country achieved a political freedom in 1947, it is yet to achieve economic freedom. The Nehruvian developmental state, modeled somewhat after the former USSR, was characterized by a closed-door economics, draconian bureaucracy, economic stagnation, big dams, and large-scale state-controlled industrialization and infrastructure projects. The Nehruvian development state collapsed in the midst of growing fiscal crises and foreign debt, and the government was forced to institute economic reforms in 1991. The liberalization of the economy which aims at a reduced state generates contradictory opinions from scholars, activists, and others affected. While some (referred to as the anti-globalization brigade by Kishwar) feel that liberalization means a selling out of India to the corporate multinationals, others feel that liberalization has not gone far enough, in that it only is for the rich, and the license-quota-permit raj still dominates the lives of the poor (SEWA feels this way). Moreover, the 1990s was also marked by an intensified Hindu nationalism, with political control at the center in Delhi\textsuperscript{150} and more importantly for this study—in Gujarat. In the context of disaster relief in post-liberalization India this Hindu nationalism gains strength from the unprecedented flow of diaspora funds which it is able to divert towards building a “Hindu

\textsuperscript{149} Kishwar. 2005.
\textsuperscript{150} This changed in 2004 with the BJP losing elections to a Congress led coalition government.
rashtra.”¹⁵¹ On the other hand, the post-liberalization Indian state is a decentralized state that has the potential of empowering locality through local governance. In fact, the Gandhian ideal of village level governance and a minimal centralized state also have the potential of becoming a reality now. In 1992, after a prolonged struggle in the Parliament, the Panchayati Raj (government at the village level) as an “autonomous, constitutionally validated and protected third tier of government” became instituted in the Constitution of India.

Moreover, as feminist geographers have argued we need to look beyond state-centered discourses of welfare and security, in which the state is largely represented as the primary provider for its citizens.¹⁵² This insight is particularly relevant in the context of the retracting state in post-liberalization India and the pro-Hindu nationalist government in Gujarat. In the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake, the government of Gujarat called upon “civil society organizations” including national and international NGOs, corporations, businesses, and interest groups to “adopt” a village for rehabilitation and rebuilding. In what was technically defined as a public-private partnership the state’s role was primarily focused on channeling (mostly foreign) funds to these organizations. In the aftermath of the 2002 religious violence, the government of Gujarat’s role in relief was at best detached, if not outright adversarial. In the Indian state’s transition from a colonial state, to a development

¹⁵¹ A recognition of the way these funds are being directed has resulted in a campaign by secular Indians in the Diaspora. Called the “campaign to stop funding hate” the movement has gained some prominence in the US and in UK. Perhaps one of the important results was the successful mobilization against Narendra Modi’s invitation to address at US universities – Narendra Modi (Chief Minister of Gujarat, BJP) was eventually denied a US visa.
state, and now a “liberal” state, the terms of engagement between the civil society, the people and the state have shifted. These shifts have created spaces in which newer conceptions of what the “Indian” nation is about are imagined and circulated.

New conceptions of the Indian nation ranging from a Hindu nation to a Gandhian nation are being imagined in these sites of relief. Such constructions are being forged in and through the involvement of hundreds of NGOs in the region. Each one of these organizations has a vision, an imagination for the future of India. The manner in which they conduct relief then is reflective of that particular imagination. For example, the building of a Hindu temple as part of reconstructed earthquake resistant villages was central to the relief work conducted by Sewabharti and the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti. Tridip Suhrud in his commentary entitled *Gujarat: no room for Dialogue* writes that in contemporary times, the NGOs have “come to symbolize civil society in Gujarat.” Underlying the above statement is a belief that civil society needs to be, is at other places, or was in Gujarat at some time in the past, a space much beyond NGOs. It reiterates Chatterjee’s claim that the most people in India do not constitute civil society. In fact, Chatterjee takes it even further to claim that “most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution.”¹⁵³

There are two reasons that this discussion of civil society, nation, and the state is critical to an understanding of the seva and the relief process in Gujarat, India. First, this discussion of civil and political society is central to understanding relief in

Gujarat because of the role of community networks in relief in the region. Even a quick look at the list of NGOs engaged in relief work in Gujarat reveals that a majority of the organizations are based on particular caste or religious groups. Often relief organizations were formed in the immediate aftermath of the disaster to take care of the members of a particular community. Relief camps were often divided by castes and almost always by religion. The interaction of community with civil society creates a complex terrain wherein notions of free association and the rational self, mix with community solidarity, and duty. In the case of relief work this interaction between civil society and community happens at the site of seva. Doing relief work is one way to claim one’s position as a duty-abiding citizen of the Indian nation-state. Relief work in Gujarat is also one way in which one can fulfils one’s obligations towards one’s religion, caste, tribe, or nation. Doing relief as seva presents an interesting paradox. Seva is being done for the public good and not for personal gain. However, according to Gandhian definitions of seva, it is the path to moksha or salvation and is in that sense a very personal quest.

The second reason for the centrality of this discussion of civil society, state and the nation, to understanding seva as productive is that in many ways the precise interactions between the state, NGOs and the populations in need of relief are constitutive of the production of the gendered national subject. Most of those that need relief in Gujarat belong to the informal sector of the labor force. They are often migrants from other states in India that came to Gujarat in search of work in the days of the textile mills. With the closure of the textile mills in the 1970s, most lost formal
employment and became part of the informal economy. Many live in slums or settlements, in houses built on illegally occupied land, with unauthorized electricity connections, and engage in employment that is unregulated by the government. In sum, they do not for the most part figure on government records and because they transgress the norms of legality (which leaves them little room to make claims on the state) in India they do not fit comfortably into definitions of citizenship.

I argue that while they do not fit into defined and regulated modalities (ration card, rent agreement, property papers, and electric/water bills) that constitute citizenship they are nevertheless central to the functioning of the Indian nation-state and its particular form of democracy. They provide the raison d’etre for the existence of many of the civil society NGOs or grassroots organizations and they do participate as important agents during election processes, when they suddenly appear on election lists.

In relief camps, it is nearly impossible to maintain an account of the populations as people often move between camps, or between camps and their homes. Yet, relief camps are one place where the often undocumented population of the city comes together. My ethnography of the relief process reveals relief camps are spaces in which these populations are formalized and produced as citizens—as rights-bearing citizens, often by the NGOs working in the camps. A formal relationship is forged between the state that is “responsible for its citizens” and the people in the relief camps. This is also simultaneously a step in which the population in the relief camps
is seen as the target of the modernizing project and a pedagogical relationship
between the NGO and the people accompanies the relief provider/receiver
relationship. The NGOs involved in relief can be viewed as double agents that use
governance tools to incorporate populations into formal rights-bearing citizens, while
creating these citizens within a certain conception of what a citizen of modern India
should be like. Doing seva in relief camps then involves governing the populations to
make them visible to the state, disciplining the populations to make them into citizens
of India, and at the same time using governmental technologies to discipline the
retreating state into being a responsible for its welfare role. In the overlaps among
these three objectives and consequences of seva in relief camps is the site in which
the change in state/civil society/population relationships is taking place in post-
liberalization India.

More so in the case of SEWA’s relief work—SEWA’s relief work turns upside down
many of the conceptions of state-population relationships, elite versus working-class
relationships, and dominant conceptions about caste, religion and gender. SEWA is
an organization of poor working-class, often lower caste, often Muslim, always
women, performing relief work as their duty. Their seva towards the nation is sure to
complicate the previous historical structures. How is one to understand SEWA’s
involvement in light of Chatterjee’s discussion? Is SEWA civil society? Is it political
society? Is it an organization through which the state extends into the territories of the
nation? Or is it an organization that disciplines the state into being responsible for its
citizens?
The paradoxes reveal themselves as one takes a closer look at the processes involved in seva through relief work. SEWA begins each project with a survey. This survey is made available to the government to keep a track of the populations and the conditions in the relief camps—so that the ‘right amount of rations and services’ may be provided. This governmental activity by SEWA can be seen as an extension of the retreating developmental state\textsuperscript{154} and so it might mean that the state is still in control. However, once we start looking at what SEWA’s survey involves (see Appendices A and B), the kind of questions asked and the kinds of documentation submitted, we start to see that while the technology might be governmental in practice SEWA is using it in its own way. SEWA’s documentation serves not just to bring the populations in need of relief under state governance but also serves to ‘conduct the conduct’ of the ‘post-liberalization’ state. SEWA’s relief work then (re)produces the state as welfare provider for populations that it might have otherwise chosen to neglect.

SEWA’s work inside relief camps and in disaster relief in general also involves the conduct of populations. SEWA women use their moral position as those engaged in seva to discipline those that they serve. Moreover, SEWA women claim that the act of seva requires for them to be self-disciplined. In Mahimaben’s words, “We get up

\textsuperscript{154} If we follow Foucault’s discussion on the retreat of the state in neo-liberal governmentality, what we see in actuality is the “prolongation of government.” A restructuring of power relationships occurs where formal techniques or governance are replaced by more informal techniques and organizations like SEWA become new actors on the block but the forms of practices essentially remain the same. For a more elaborate discussion of Foucault and neo-liberal governmentality see: Lemke, Thomas. 2000. “Foucault, Governmentality and Critique” Paper presented at Rethinking Marxism Conference. University of Amherst (MA) September 21-24. 2000.
early to we make sure we reach on time. We clean, cook and serve in the camps. All this sets an example for those in the camps. We have to teach by example, if we go there and start ordering them around—go cook, go clean. Will they listen? No one will listen. All of this requires a lot of self-discipline, only then can you really affect change.”

Mahimaben also described an incident at a camp that I think reveals SEWA’s paradoxical position as an agent of change producing a ‘modern’ India and as bearers of ‘tradition.’

One day on reaching the camp I saw that there was so much filth (gand) in the camp. Whoever ate they threw their plate wherever they were sitting. They drank water and left the cups just anywhere. There was wasted food lying here and there. I said: look at all this. Does it look good to you? There are so many foreign NGOs who come here? What are they going to say? Is this how Indians eat and drink? They will say what dirty people we are. Aren’t you ashamed? I said this and then I starting picking up the mess and sweeping the floor. Seeing me work at cleaning a man felt ashamed and came up to me and said: Mahimaben, give this to me. Then he started sweeping the floor.

Then I looked at the women who were sitting. I said: Look at that man sweeping. Are you not ashamed? This is not a man’s work.

At this point Mahimaben pauses and looks at me. She then explained to me: “I do not say that men should not clean. They should. Everyone should clean. But women sit and a man cleans, is that appropriate.”

This statement from Mahimaben surprised me. Mahimaben has been a crusader for women’s rights in her Muslim family and yet there are some on-the-ground jobs that have gendered markings for her. This statement from Mahimaben directly contradicted the vision she and SEWA articulate of a Gandhian nation. Even as Gandhi essentialized masculine/feminine attributes he did so by urging men to be
more like women. SEWA is a large collective and perhaps it is the disjuncture between individual members and the collective that at times opens up moments like these. However, as Geralidine Pratt has argued, we need to pay attention to the geographical contexts from where discourses emerge and where they circulate. While within her family Mahimaben strives to question gender norms in order to empower women as social actors capable of making their own decisions. Her use of gendered notions of men and women’s work in public space may be reflective of SEWA’s strategy to showcase informal sector poor women as the real workers, contributive to national development and economy.

While the disciplining of women and men at the camps results in the production of gendered citizens for SEWA’s version of a Gandhian nation it does so within a specific power relationship. Moreover, as the relief work produces disciplined and gendered citizens from the populations in the camps, it is nevertheless also produces the gendered subjectivities of those who perform the seva. Now questions arise about whether disciplining is inherently bad—does it cause a loss of liberty? Is power always exercised against someone? Sharp et al in their discussion on the *Geographies* 155 Joseph Alter’s (2000) fascinating study on sex and diet in Gandhian nationalism juxtaposes Gandhian and Foucauldian understanding of power and discipline to present an alternative reading of the Gandhi. Alter’s alternative reading of Gandhi also presents an alternative perspective on the relationship of body discipline and docility. Following Foucault, scholars attribute discipline with the production of ‘docile bodies.’ Foucault argued that while discipline increased the forces of the body in the economic sense, it “disassociates power from the body.” Gandhi philosophy argues for an opposite effect. Gandhi attributes discipline to freedom. According to Gandhi, swaraj or self-rule is not possible without self-discipline. In Gandhi the notion of self-rule referred to an independent Indian nation-state and also to the freedom of each individual in the nation or rather globally. The freedom is not just from colonial rule but also from selfish desire and material needs. While for both Foucault and Gandhi discipline works by internalizing ‘good behavior’ and therefore comes from inside rather than an external force, there is an essential difference in the way this internalization is conceptualized in both Foucault and Gandhi. In the Gandhian sense the desire for discipline has to come from the individual and is therefore not the result of the panopticon’s surveillance. In my reading of Gandhi he situated discipline in the realm of morality, equating it with moral power.
of domination and resistance argued that power is visible in many forms.\textsuperscript{156} It is not always used to dominate; rather, it is productive and can be used to protect. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to engage in a theoretical discussion on discipline and liberty, I engage with some affects of discipline as I write the ethnography. I illustrate in the following chapters how SEWA’s relief work brings together Hindu, Muslim; men, women and Gujarati, Bihari—into the imagination of a nation in which class/caste/gender/religious hierarchies and differences do not determine the worth of a citizen. While such a nation only exists in SEWA’s imagination it nevertheless empowers the new subjects into believing its existence—even if such a belief is temporary. In the state of Gujarat, which is ruled by the BJP, SEWA is able to work towards such reconstruction by working with, through, and against the state.

\textit{Bypassing the (post-liberalization) state: Cell phones, pagers and SEWA Ids}

Geographic discussion on the operations of political actors shows how communication links are utilized by these actors to overcome the constraints imposed by their place-bound struggles.\textsuperscript{157} Such channels of communications become particularly relevant when other scales of praxis, particularly the scale of the state, become constraining or closed.\textsuperscript{158} In the context of a pro-Hindu nationalist Gujarat state government, it was at many times critical for SEWA to utilize alternative scales...

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for mobilization. Apart from its much localized approach, something else that has
enabled SEWA to bypass state control is liberalization of the Indian economy and the
flooding of the market with what is popularly referred to as the ‘fruits of
liberalization’—a range of commodities never before within the reach of common
people. Poor SEWA women now apply for loans to enable them to buy cell phones
and pagers— instruments they will use to conduct their business with ease. The high-
tech computerized offices of the SEWA bank are continually flooded with such
requests. Liberalization has also enabled the cellular services to be privatized and not
under state control anymore. While landlines are still for the most part provided for
and operated by state-related agencies, cellular phones and pager services are
privatized. Internet technologies are easily available through cyber cafés, even to
those that cannot afford a computer or a connection on a regular basis. Hundreds of
TV channels now circulate in the homes of Indian residents, as opposed to a few
state-controlled ones that were primarily broadcasting family planning or agricultural
modernization related programs. The printed media too is easier to produce and
disperse in the form of newspapers, magazines, brochures and pamphlets.

SEWA’s relief work made use of all of these modes of communication as SEWA
workers sought to provide relief to their sisters. Just after the earthquake, many
SEWA women left for Kutch. Their cell phones, affectionately referred to as
theliphones159 by the SEWA women, were their means of communication and tool of
safety. Reemaben, a young SEWA worker, convinced her family that she would be

159 A take on telephones – but literally translates as bag phones – or phones that can be carried around
in their bags.
safe in Kutch because she now “carries the cell phone.” During the religious violence in 2002, it was very difficult and unsafe to venture out into the streets, especially for the first few days. Moreover, due to the violence, burning and destruction most of the landlines were disconnected. SEWA women’s recollections of these days highlight the unreliability of the government landlines and the freedom that cell phones afforded them. The introduction of private companies in the cellular business has resulted in competitive prices, no waits to get connections, and unlike government controlled landlines these were not cut off during times of crises.

What can I tell you? Our phone was cut, as was our electricity. We were in darkness—we could only sense what *toofaan* (literally storm, but is often used in Gujarat to describe communal violence) was brewing outside.

Fatmaben, SEWA member

I was constantly on my cell phone in those early days, sometimes on two phones at the same time. Rohiniben, Mahimaben, Reemaben and Madeenaben, all of them kept on calling me, telling me about the situation in their areas. I kept trying to call the police stations. It was not much help. No one in these government offices wanted to pick up the phones.

Jashodaben, SEWA manager

My phone never stopped ringing. At first I was scared, what if someone traces my calls and comes to attack me. There were calls not just from Ahmedabad but from other districts as well. I had to respond to the insecurity of out members.

Mahimaben, member of SEWA executive council

We all kept in touch. This was important for our organization. For the first time I was so relieved that our bank had approved so many loan applications for cell phones in the past year.

Reemaben, SEWA bank worker

Elabhen, Renanaben, Pratibhaben, all of our senior leaders were continuously on the phone. Elabhen even called up the Prime Minister Vajpayee in Delhi.

Reshmaben, SEWA member
Even during the functioning of the relief camps in which SEWA worked for more than three months, the cell phones were critical tools. Since SEWA served in five relief camps and had its organizers moving around in other affected areas the cell phones provided them with mobility in terms of communication. SEWA’s central office in Ellisbridge was the coordinating headquarters and all relief-related strategies and planning were conducted there. SEWA relief workers made frequent calls to the main office to ask for advice or seek additional help.

Other than communication the cell phones also provided security for the women venturing out into unsafe areas. Mahimaben related to me an incident in which her phone came in handy in saving the lives of her team.

We were in Bapunagar on a Friday. The situation was so tense that if someone even slaps someone else that would lead to a riot. If a Muslim hurt a Hindu then a Hindu mob will collect, if a Hindu hurt a Muslim then a Muslim mob will collect. I was reading my Friday Namaaz in a room at the camp. I had fifteen young Hindu girls with me, all SEWA workers and I was responsible for their safety—this was a Muslim camp. I heard a lot of hustle around me and the girls came and sat down close to me. It seems some incident had taken place and there was a lot of tension in the air. It was a large Muslim camp if they decided to attack our SEWA girls I would not have been able to stop them. I broke my Namaaz—we are not allowed to do so—but these girls, they were my responsibility. I picked up my phone and called up the SEWA office. They immediately sent a Jeep and we decided to get out of there as soon as possible. Even though I am sure that the boys at the camp would not have harmed us, they have always shown me lot of respect, but I could not take the risk and was thankful for my phone.

The possibility of gendered violence is increased in times of communal riots.160

SEWA women experienced an increased spatial mobility and a sense of safety as they

160 Feminist scholars have extensively discussed how women become markers of their communities and therefore subject to gendered violence. The honor of the women becomes projected as the honor of the community leading to increased violence against the women of the opposite side.
carried their *theliphones* with them. They were also able to rely more on mutual support rather than approaching government employees or the police for help. In other words the cell phones and the pagers gave the SEWA women a certain freedom, not just in terms of spatial mobility but also in terms of independent functioning away from state control. SEWA workers used their cell phones to arrange meetings, coordinate relief supplies, apprise each other of dangerous situations, communicate their safety to their families, negotiate with suppliers and distributors for providing work to those in the camps, and to seek outside support (from state and non-state actors). However, cell phones were not only a means of communication. SEWA women, secure in their possession of the *theliphone*, moved around in affected neighborhoods inquiring about their sisters, visiting their members, and making relevant assessments. SEWA’s ability to reach areas “where even the government officials were afraid to visit” created for it a role in which it was able to displace (to some extent) the state from its image as provider.161

In addition to their use of mobile technologies SEWA women consistently relied on their SEWA ID cards to move around in times of curfew and at other times to establish their legitimate access to public space.

Yes, they (police) would stop us. They would tell us that there is a curfew and we are not supposed to be on the streets. We showed them our SEWA ID cards and told them that we were only doing seva. They would eventually allow us to go ahead.

Rahimabem

The SEWA ID is very useful. We can walk into relief camps and show our ID card to the camp organizer. They all recognize SEWA and let us go ahead with our work without creating any trouble.

Madeenaben

161 More so in a situation where the state was itself implicated in assisting the perpetuators of violence.
Our SEWA ID is like our ration card. Even the government agreed to let us use it as a license to occupy our space in the vegetable market.

Fatemiben

The SEWA ID card is an important asset for SEWA members. In fact, in Elabehn’s words, “any identity card, paper certificate, or license is a valuable asset because it establishes (their) place in some sort of a system.” While SEWA did engage with the government to eventually secure curfew passes for its relief workers and their jeeps; for the initial days the SEWA workers primarily relied on their SEWA ID card. Within the camps the SEWA ID cards helped identify members.

While the SEWA ID allows SEWA members to bypass state control to some extent, it nevertheless requires registration and membership in the organization (SEWA). The SEWA women with IDs appear on SEWA lists and statistics. In many ways SEWA appears as a microstate with its own mechanics of governance and welfare of its members. For example SEWA has a large social security infrastructure. There is SEWA insurance, SEWA health care, SEWA childcare, a SEWA Trade Facilitation Center, SEWA Academy, SEWA bank—the list goes on. In effect, SEWA is capable of supporting a population of at least 700,000 women (its current membership) in their welfare needs. The size of the organization and its infrastructure clearly changes the dynamics between the NGO and the state.

Gendered seva: At home in the world

My father ‘served’ in the Indian army. He managed workshops that made (military) vehicles—a job that many engineers and management professionals do irrespective of
whether they are in the army or not. Yet everyone said he was doing a great service to the nation, he was protecting those who lived within the national borders. People saluted him as he passed by; he got special concessions, and an army truck delivered free rations to our house every week.

The military in India is often called upon to perform disaster relief. During earthquake relief in 2001, the military vehicles were a great help in removing rubble and rescuing people. In the wake of the religious violence in 2002, the military had to be called in to control the riots, as the police were unable or unwilling to perform the ‘service.’ All of this service is well documented, well reported, well compensated, and of course well rewarded with national service medallions.

However, the kind of service analyzed for this study, is hardly ever visible, hardly ever reported, and has never really been compensated, let alone rewarded. This is the seva of poor working-class women in the informal economy, performed as an extension of and in addition to their regular jobs and responsibilities. Moreover, this is the service of women, who are for the most part considered to be on the receiving end of the service. They are seen as the victims, the beneficiaries of seva, and the ones in need of support and protection.¹⁶²

Many feminist scholars and geographers have written about ways in which socially constructed spheres of the public and private affect the sexual division of labor, as

¹⁶² Such gendered constructions are also made visible in Lorraine Dowler’s work on women firefighters.
these are superimposed onto the communal and the domestic, or the political and the personal. Such constructions have mapped themselves differently in different spatial and social contexts.\(^{163}\) Within India itself, gendered spatial divisions manifest themselves differently based on class, caste, religion, age, marital position, and historical circumstance. What is relevant to this study is an understanding of how a division between the home and the world, between the inner and the outer, and between the spiritual and the material has played itself out historically and now in the postcolonial post-liberalization India. Partha Chaterjee’s discussion of the ‘nationalist resolution of the women’s question’ pointed to the construction of separate domains in colonial India. The Indian nationalists in an attempt to construct and legitimize the nationalist project constructed two domains: The outer was the material domain, this was the arena in which the colonizer or more generally the west was superior—this was the domain where India has to catch up or modernize. Conversely, the inner domain, the spiritual domain, which is also the more important one, is one in which India or more generally the east is superior and therefore this is the domain to be preserved as tradition.

The constructions were particularly relevant in the case of women, as they became the markers of tradition associated with the inner domain of the home that is India. The men needed to modernize and catch up with the outside domain that is the world. Chatterjee also pointed to how the dynamic of this dichotomy resulted in the construction of the idea of a ‘new woman,’ who would be modern and traditional at

the same time. The ‘new woman’ of the anti-colonial movement was to selectively ingrain western modernity and yet in the ‘most essential’ aspects retain the spirituality of Indian traditions.

Seva too appears as a gendered concept in the early part of the twentieth century wherein public seva is primarily the domain of men. Carey Watt writes that women in the 1910s worked primarily as nurses in melas, but their work was confined to inside spaces of the hospital and dispensaries and “clearly did not have the same scope for action as men.” Madhu Kishwar points out that even when girls and women in the Arya Samaj’s Kanya Mahavidyalaya were taught to love and serve one’s country, it was emphasized that the “proper sphere of women’s activity was domestic.”

Patiseva (seva of the husband), inside the home, was taught as a way for women to serve the country. In contrast to the Indian Boy Scout movements that emphasized bodily health and physical strength, outdoor games and training, the Indian Girl Scout movement stressed on homecraft, nursing, hygiene and cooking. Watt further points out that in the early part of the 1900s males particularly upper-caste Hindus were encouraged to become “manly, dynamic, and patriotic citizens” by serving the motherland.

In the years after 1920, Gandhi’s framing of anti-colonial politics however, created a special place for what Chatterjee calls the ‘new woman’ in the public domain.

Gandhian politics had two interrelated consequences in relation to women’s seva.

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First, by bringing women out into the public sphere as participants in the nationalist movement, he redefined the concept of politics. Second, by advocating spinning as a political statement inside the homes, and done by women (and men), he redefined women’s political relationship to their homes and to their work. Moreover, Gandhi’s advocacy of women’s critical role in public protests and in public service reversed the gendered dynamics of the ideal spatial assignments of seva, and one could argue redefined the meaning of citizenship.

Devaki Jain positions Gandhi as a feminist. She argues that to Gandhi “the means were as important as the ends.”166 Sujata Patel provides an excellent review of Gandhi’s conception of women and shows that there were significant shifts within Gandhian thought on the question of women as he modified his stance on women’s natural place as her home, to women as naturally suited to public participation in the non-violent struggle.167 For Gandhi, women embodied all that was pure, self-sacrificing and spiritual. In encompassing all that he held as critical to non-violent struggle, he idealized the woman as an ideal participant in the service of the nation. In the last two decades of the anti-colonial movement Gandhi actively encouraged the entry of women into public space by arguing that such a step would result in a ‘spiritualization of politics.’ Such ‘spiritualization of politics,’ he argued, was essential for true swaraj (self-rule) and can only be achieved with the help of the ‘pure’ women of the nation. Thus in the Gandhian nation, women become critical

agents in the production of the nation and are not just subjects that reproduce the nation.

Shakuntla Rao presents a critique and extension of Chatterjee’s argument—one that has resonance in postcolonial India. She juxtaposes an analysis of the practices of contemporary sati and amniocentesis to argue that the women’s question in postcolonial India is “doubly displaced: once by nationalism in its purpose to integrate and secularize India as a modern nation and again by religion in order to reconstruct India as a traditional Hindu nation.” The constant conflict between these two “universalizing totalities,” I argue, also plays out in the way women’s seva is performed and perceived in postcolonial, post-liberalization and fast Hinduizing India. The perceived threats to women’s purity (and thereby the nation’s purity) as a consequence of ‘western globalization,’ result in acts ranging from a celebration of sati, to a call for a uniform civil code.

Returning to the discussion of the ‘new woman,’ I also want to highlight that the ‘new woman’ was constructed in opposition to the image of the “coarse woman.” Women in anti-colonial politics almost always belonged to the middle-classes and came from “respectable” families. Thus (pre-Gandhian) public seva was not in reality an open domain for all women (or all men). Even in Gandhian politics his call for mass involvement remained severely limited in its reach. Kishwar in her analysis of Gandhi and Women points out that despite Gandhi’s repeated calls very few non-

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169 Ibid. (318).
middle-class women were consistent participants or took leadership roles. However, in the case of SEWA we see a committed engagement with Gandhi’s vision of the nation and the struggle for this nation, by working-class women.

Liberalization and deindustrialization in Gujarat have resulted in working-class women to become a common sight. More than 94% of the women in Gujarat are employed in the informal sector—a significant majority of them are poor. Moreover, with the state’s retraction from many of its service-related projects, many of these jobs have been informalized. Either as paid service providers, such as domestic helpers, or as unpaid ‘voluntary’ workers in disaster relief, these women have acquired an increased visibility and place in the Indian political economy. As a sequel to Gandhi’s notion of seva as an ideal vocation for women, what we see now emerging are women as the primary providers of on-the-ground social seva. In the next section I explore how this on-the-ground seva by women is productive of discourses of community— in this case the national community.

**Seva Sisters**

Abhaben and AReemaben are co-workers in SEWA. They call themselves work sisters but feel that their relationship goes much beyond work (waise to who kaam ke nate se meri behn lagi, par ek usse bhi bara rishta hota hai). They both feel connected because they are both “working-class, women, poor and belong to the same nation (desh).” When I met both Abhaben and Ameenaben they had known each other for a little over a year and yet they felt that they have always shared a bond.
“Abhaben ne meri seva aisi kari ke jaise who meri saag ho (Abhaben served me as if we were blood sisters),” says Ammenaben who is about 10 years older than Abhaben. In describing her work as part of the SEWA relief team in the Shah-Alam camp in Ahmedabad Abhaben says, “Behn hi behn ke kaam aati hai (only a sister comes to the aid of her sister).” She claims to have worked for twelve hours each day for three months during the riot-relief period in 2002, never stopping to think of her own house, her family or herself. Abhaben is a Hindu and has been working on managing the contracts for SEWA’s cleaning workers’ cooperative for the past five years. She has a high school diploma and her husband is a college graduate. At first she scoffed at the idea of doing work as a cleaner—she felt it was “dirty work, not suitable for (her) caste and education.” She always dreamed of a “desk and chair job.” But then she saw the nice uniforms that the women in the co-operative get to wear, and “all the fancy gloves and cleaning equipment,” and she agreed to join the cooperative. Her hard work was recognized by senior SEWA members, and led to her appointment as the manager of that co-operative. She now has her desk and chair job. She has learned from SEWA “never to look down upon any work or caste.” She has also learned that work is the way through which she can contribute towards the development of the country and herself. “This was Gandhiji’s message to the people and this is SEWA’s message to us,” adds Abhaben.

Ameenaben is a Muslim who migrated to Ahmedabad along with her husband after they got married about 30 years ago. They both had a small business in their chali, which they ran together, but “everything was destroyed” when the mob burned their
house. They, along with their pregnant daughter, fled to the camp. It was here that Ameenaben met Abhaben. “At first I did not realize that Abhaben was a Hindu—why would a Hindu come to a Muslim camp to serve” says Ameenaben. Only when they both sat down to talk did she notice the sindoor.\footnote{Red marking on the forehead – depicts marital status of married Hindu women} Abhaben, with the help of other women, made sure that all the spaces in the camp were clean. She helped serve the food and then made sure that the area was cleaned up well for the next meal. Abhaben took particular interest in Ameenaben because she appeared badly burned and had difficulty eating. While the SEWA healthcare team was taking care of the burn wounds, Abhaben made sure that Ameenaben ate her meals properly, often times coaxing her and feeding her “with her own hands.” The tireless seva of Abhaben for Ameenaben and many others like her has further strengthened the bond that they both feel “they always shared but did not know.” Ameenaben is now a SEWA member and is working on building back her house and business with assistance from SEWA bank. She volunteers at the Shantipath kendra in her locality that is operated by SEWA, where she gives talks to other women about the role women can play in maintaining peace. Through her work with SEWA she has “felt like a useful member of the nation” and her seva has she argues “resulted in (her) own upliftment as well as that of (her) community.” Most women in Ameenaben’s chali have now joined SEWA. Both Abhaben and Ameenaben recall the small children who with their teacher from the SEWA childcare team sang a song for those living in the camp:

‘Oh my \textit{watan}, my motherland, let us work to create heaven on earth, here in our land.’
I think we need to pay close attention to the nature of relationships being forged in relief camps. Ameenaben and Abhaben imagine themselves to be part of the same community, as always having shared a bond. What is that bond and in what way have they always shared it? They are both poor working-class women but more importantly they both share a vision that women like them are equal members of the nation. Abhaben’s seva for Ameenaben resulted in recognition of the bond that they shared and (re)created a feeling of solidarity. However, this solidarity is affirmed and expressed not as a result of the circulation of any inanimate media publication or a pre-designed symbol but through physical face-to-face contact and Abhaben’s service. Abhaben’s work in the relief camp serves not just as an affirmation of her status as citizen, performing her duty, but also works to create a sense of a family, the national family. As she diligently and ‘selflessly’ fulfils her duty as a daughter or younger sister (in this case) of the family, she forms bonds that strengthen the nation. Especially in this case: Muslims in Gujarat are constantly referred to as foreigners, as the enemy, as Pakistanis and thus not citizens of India. Abhaben’s seva for Ameenaben assigned to Ameenaben the status of a valued citizen of India and resulted in Ameenaben taking up her duty as one. In focusing on the role of symbolic and literal language in the construction of the nation we often tend to forget the role that concrete actions like seva play in the construction of the nation and its citizens.
Nation through seva

Nations are not formed in a day, the formation requires years.

Gandhi, Hind Swaraj

By now it is a given in academic literature that nations are not divinely ordained given realities but rather are “imagined political communities.” The debate and reconfiguring now seems to be about how these imaginations are constructed and disseminated and also how do these constructions intersect with other constructions such as those of gender, class, caste, sexuality and race in specific geographical and historical contexts. In the revised edition (1991) of Imagined Communities Benedict Anderson shifts his previous argument about the colonized nations in Africa and Asia as modeled directly after nineteenth century European states, to argue that these imaginations are constructed by the colonial states. He goes on to show the role of the census, the map, and the museum in shaping post-colonial nationalisms. Along with Anderson, other scholars have articulated histories, geographies and anthropologies of how nationalisms in post-colonial nations took root along with the development of print-capitalism, administrative practices, and institutionalized surveillance. Partha Chatterjee challenges this notion of nationalism in colonized nations as (modular) products of colonial imaginations. Rather, he develops a complex story of the interaction of the colonial and the colonized, and shows how

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indigenous nationalisms were creative endeavors that emerged as a result of the relations between the colonial state and the colonized. The common thread in most of these studies is the emphasis on the role of language and literature in the development of nationalism.

But how does national identity spread and take root in an ethnically diverse, multi-lingual and largely illiterate population such as that of India? Sandra Frietag argues that visual vocabularies generated through popular posters and films, and disseminated through modern capitalist technologies were key to the establishment of national identity in South Asia. Lisa Trivedi builds upon Frietag’s scholarship to show how khadi, a handspun and handwoven fabric served to spread the notion of a national community in India. Khadi became the material icon of the swadeshi movement that sought to encourage production and consumption of home-made Indian goods in the hope of creating a self-reliant national community. Trivedi’s study reveals how khadi became a material artifact that “marked bodies as distinctly Indian” rather than belonging to a particular caste, religion or regional group. Clothing and color are indeed one of the most powerful expressions of gendered nationalism(s) in India, and a more recent example is the heightened

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175 Frietag, Sandra. 2001. “Visions of the Nation: Theorizing the Nexus between Creation, Consumption, and Participation in the Public Sphere” in Pinny Christopher and Dwyer, Rosalind (Eds.). Pleasure and the Nation. Delhi: Oxford University Press.


177 Khadi, even today, is clothing that is associated with the political message of economic nationalism. Politicians, social workers, activists and individuals expressing their nationalism wear khadi as a political statement. Gandhian workers and women in SEWA wear and promote the use of khadi. In SEWA academy wearing khadi is almost an unstated rule and most women wear khadi produced by other SEWA women. From my experience, a sure way to get commented upon is to wear foreign made cloth.
visibility of the saffron clothing and flag in the public performance of a Hindu nationalism.

However, I argue that an equally powerful way in which national identity is constructed and maintained is through the direct face-to-face contact during periods of distress and relief. While I agree with Anderson’s notion of nation as imagined since most members of the community will never actually meet each other, I also would like to direct attention to the connections that are established when some members of this community do meet each other. Such interactions occur in actual physical space rather than in any imagined abstract space.\textsuperscript{178} Often these interactions occur across geographical distance, especially in cases such as disaster relief where an urban member might serve in a rural area, or across social differences such as between members of different class, caste and religious affiliations. Cross-spatial and cross-religious interactions assist in the creation of a broader national community. Such interactions, however occasional are central to imagining community beyond the narrow confines of one’s traditional community. I argue that these interactions are critical to the construction of the nation, and its citizens; to the expression, (re)production and (re)articulation of gender, class, caste and religions identity, and to the construction of scale.

\textsuperscript{178} The imagined abstract space that I am referring to is Anderson’s notion of the ‘communion that lives in the mind’ of the people in this imagined community. The notion of people-to-people contact required to construct nations is well articulated in writings of Gandhi and in other descriptions of anti-colonial nationalism. See Confino, Alon and Skaria, Ajay. 2002. “The Local Life of Nationhood” in \textit{National Identities}, 4:1. However broader theorizations of the imagining of the nation seem to forget to articulate it within their discussions of census, maps and print technologies.
Carey Watt’s study on service organizations in the first two decades of the nineteenth century points to the centrality of seva in forming what Watt calls vertical (caste, class) and horizontal (transregional) connections. Watt argues that the “social servants could literally see new possibilities of the nation in front of their eyes as men and women of different castes, classes and regions acted together in service for the common cause of uplifting India.”179

SEWA women act strategically when they continue to visit potential members’ houses despite repeated refusals, rejections and sometimes being turned away. “But we persevere,” says Mahimaben, an elected official in SEWA. She adds:

If the daughter-in-law in the family is unreceptive, we try to talk to the mother-in-law, then we will visit them with someone they know in the neighborhood. Often times they shun us away thinking that we are family planning wallas, going door to door to preach them not to have children. We tell them we are not from that department; we go again, this time with information on loans and saving schemes. Most women have the need for a loan if not immediately then whenever an emergency crops up—such as a daughter’s marriage, or a sickness.

The constant visits and relief during the time of need help to build a relationship that culminates in more members being added to SEWA. During the relief work in 2002 Mahimaben claims to have “gained a whole new generation.” Moreover, disasters lead to vulnerable populations who become potentially willing subjects for the project of nation building.

Recognizing disaster relief as critical sites for construction of gendered national subjectivities, I question the lack of attention to it in theoretical abstractions of nationalism even as empirical evidence is available. I argue that the lack of attention in theoretical articulations of nationalism, to such concrete on-the-ground actions that are equally productive of national identity as visual imagery and print capitalism, has to do with two discourses—one geographic and the other related to gender.

First, the discourse of the local as primarily a subordinate site where the supposedly more powerful scales of national and global act and produce, contributes towards making invisible the productive aspects of locality. Geographers including Gibson-Graham, Kevin Cox, and Andrew Herod have in different ways challenged the dominant conception of the global as the all powerful, and all pervasive. Alon Confino and Ajay Skaria have also argued for an increased attention to the local in the context of nationalism as according them, “Nationhood does not exhaust, sublate or transcend this local” but in many ways “sustains nationalism.” Moreover, feminist political geographer Lynn Staeheli has argued that drawing separations between the local as a sphere of private concerns and national as the public sphere of the state reinforces patriarchal forms of politics and denies political agency to non-elites.

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180 Ibid. (7).
Second, the discourse of nationalism as a ‘fraternity’\textsuperscript{182} and as a ‘male construct’\textsuperscript{183} serves to make women’s agency invisible in the project of nation building. More often than not the work of on-the-ground seva lies with women. Women as schoolteachers, as health care providers and as grassroots caregivers are engaged in the physical and pedagogical mission of producing national citizens. However, such work is often looked at as an extension of women’s ‘natural’ role as caregiver, not requiring any particular acquired skill or expertise, and therefore not work at all. To add to this often such work happens in spaces such as the home, which are not regarded as productive spaces.\textsuperscript{184} Women’s work is thus seen as (re)productive work for the nation but not as productive of the nation. The gender and the spatial aspects of seva work, I argue, make it invisible to theorists of nationalism.

Central to SEWA’s community building is the notion of a gendered citizen. While they strive to empower women they nevertheless do so within a fixed definition of womanhood\textsuperscript{185} and its role in the ‘development of the nation.’ This is not to say that their definition is not revolutionary. While SEWA assigns many gendered attributes, such as being more peaceful and more self-sacrificing than men to their women members, they nevertheless question the class, caste and religious attributes that are also mutually constitutive of gender in Gujarat. For example, the notion of working-

\textsuperscript{182} Anderson. 1991.
\textsuperscript{184} Numerous feminist geographers have presented this critique. See for example: Domosh, Mona and Seager, Joni. 2001. Putting Women in Place: Feminist geographers make sense of the world. London: The Guilford Press.
\textsuperscript{185} This paradox lies at the heart of feminism. See Scott, Joan. 1996. Only paradoxes to offer: French feminists and the rights of man. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
class women as being crude, untrustworthy, and possibly thieves is challenged, as is the notion of Muslim women as oppressed and weak.\textsuperscript{186}

SEWA’s relief work then appears very similar to the Gandhian notion of building relationships through seva. SEWA women perform seva in camps and relief sites for victims of disaster, those who at that moment are in a weaker position than the SEWA relief workers themselves. However, the objective is to make the disaster victim self-reliant and as most of those who SEWA women serve become SEWA members, one could possibly read the Gandhian idea of \textit{mitrata} in the relationship involved. SEWA’s history of passive resistance against unjust employers and unfair state policies can be read as the other level of Gandhian protocol—that with a superior. Moreover, in Gandhi and in SEWA, we see a gendering of seva that is nevertheless revolutionary. While Gandhi did see seva as an essentially feminine attribute, he did so with an understanding of seva as a powerful productive practice. Through seva, he asserted, women could empower themselves, and emerge as important agents in the production of the nation. He insisted, “the few educated women we have in India will have to descend from their western heights and come down to India’s plains…This question of women’s liberation, India’s liberation, removal of untouchability, amelioration of the economic conditions of the masses and the like resolve themselves into the villages, reconstruction or rather reformation of the village

\textsuperscript{186} Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. \textit{The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories.} Princeton: Princeton University Press. See Chatterjee’s discussion of the new woman in colonial India that relied upon excluding the working-class women as deserving members of the nation. Such a sentiment is very much prevalent in urban India today. An example is the struggle for access to public space by women vendors in Gujarat. See Bhatt. 2006. “Vendors” in \textit{We are poor but so many: The story of self-employed women in India.} Delhi: Oxford University Press.
life.” There are two aspects in Gandhi’s call that should be noted here. First, he connected the movement for women’s empowerment to the movement for national independence, to the movement to uplift the subalterns. Moreover, he insisted that women take the lead in this movement. Second, he assigned a certain geography to this construction of the nation—India’s villages. The construction of the nation, according to Gandhi, had to take place through face-to-face seva, thereby connecting people in remote parts of the nation.

SEWA’s relief work also challenges any hierarchical or ontologically separate understanding of place and scale. Even when working at the scale of a woman’s body (such as in health-care), or a small street (such as getting a chali cleaned), SEWA views it as work for the nation. SEWA, a grassroots organization that started with five women getting together in Gujarat, now has SEWA Bharat and was instrumental in initiating the global communities of homenet.org and streetnet.org. SEWA’s work at the global scale has resulted in the ILO convention on home-based workers (1996), and SEWA is spearheading the movement to have this recognized in all nations of the world. SEWA is a member of the IUF (International Union of Food, Agriculture, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers), the ITGLWF (International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation), and the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions).

188 SEWA Bharat is the national body of SEWA that brings together the SEWA in five other states of India with SEWA in Gujarat. SEWA Bharat is not the same as Sewabharti which is a Hindu service organization belonging to the Sangh Parivar.
189 Homenet and Streetnet are global communities that strive to bring together home based and street based workers all over the world.
In Gandhian seva too, we see a similar challenge to the discreteness of scalar entities and to the notion of an all-powerful abstract global space. Connecting his work for the nation to the spiritual upliftment of his soul Gandhi writes, “my national service is part of my training for freeing my soul from bondage of flesh.”\(^{190}\) A content analysis of SEWA publications makes their Gandhian position very apparent. This study of seva in relief also needs to pay attention to the Gandhian philosophy of sarvodaya or selfless service for all. Moreover, as I elaborate in the subsequent section, SEWA’s relief appears very similar to descriptions of famine relief in Gandhi’s writings.\(^{191}\)

**Gandhi in relief**

To become one people means that the thirty crores must become one family. To be one nation means believing that, when a single Indian dies of starvation, all of us are dying of it and act accordingly. The best way of doing this is for every person to take under his (sic) charge the people in his (sic) immediate neighbourhood.

Gandhi\(^{192}\)

Gandhi inaugurated the constructive program in the 1920s alongside the non-cooperation movement. The constructive program incorporated other movements such as *Swadeshi* (literally of one’s own nation), *Sarvodaya* (literally rise of all, also

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\(^{191}\) My reasons for referring back to Gandhi in an ethnographic study of SEWA in relief draw inspiration from Joseph Alter’s ethnographic study of wrestling in India which “coincidentally” turns out to be about “Gandhi: Sex. Diet and Politics”. Alter writes, “I am uncomfortable with making too sharp a distinction between ethnography and history (for) the past is clearly in the present and the present in the past.”(xv). Much like Alter’s argument related to the body in Indian nationalism, my story of seva, gender and nationalism in an ethnography of disaster relief would be practically impossible to construct without a continual reference to Gandhi. Moreover, isn’t it the fate of post-colonial nations to never be free of the past.

\(^{192}\) CWMG 19. (285).
read as a dedication to public welfare) and Aparigriha (non-possessiveness).\textsuperscript{193} In bringing together production, consumption, nation, and the self, through his constructive program, Gandhian philosophy highlighted the connection between individual bodies, the nation, and the global political economy. Through his call for \textit{swadeshi} and the promotion of Khadi he created bodies that looked, produced, and consumed “Indian.”\textsuperscript{194} Through sarvodaya, Gandhi brought the nation to the doorsteps of those disconnected to the happenings of the empire and the freedom movement, and through the philosophy of Apargriha he produced “ideal citizens” who cared not for themselves but “selflessly served the nation.” Gandhi’s constructive program was crucial to establishing the people-to-people contact that contributed to this “imagined community” that we now know as India.

Bhiku Parekh in his book on Gandhi’s political philosophy points out that Gandhi rejected any abstract notion of internationalism, even though he articulated many thoughts on the global community.\textsuperscript{195} Gandhi’s global community was one that had to be experientially created through neighborly seva. Gandhi argued that each individual belonged to a certain community, to which they have emotional and moral attachments. There is therefore a mutual responsibility of the individual and the community to each other’s needs. The community, according to Gandhi, was an individual’s primary (though not sole) concern. Obviously, then for Gandhi seva for

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{194} Trivedi (1999) has shown that even though the Gandhian idea of swadeshi had more to do with home-production than national production, the consequence was the association of Khadi with the national body. Moreover, here the Indian is highlighted to illustrate the notion of a broader community, that brings together people of different castes, classes, religions and regions.
  \item \textsuperscript{195} Parekh. 1989.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the community was not separable from seva for oneself. In this way by bringing together the micro-scale of the individual with the national scale he defined the constructive program as one designed to build a nation by building each individual.196

The constructive program gained special significance during times of disaster relief, particularly famine relief. Gandhi saw such events as both an opportunity to reach out to the people who were isolated in villages or remote areas and as a means to expand his ideas about Swadeshi as essential to Swaraj. Pages and pages of descriptions written by Gandhi were written for Young India and the Harijan, describing “Khadi as famine relief,” or “Spinning as insurance” against disaster. Consider the contents of a letter published in the Young India (1921):

When I wrote about the spinning wheel being a household instrument of famine insurance, I little realized its implications. What I then saw through the glass of reason darkly, I now see more clearly with the undimmed eye of experience. With famine staring us in the face in Bijapur, Ahmednagar and in some parts of Gujarat, it behooves us to consider carefully this spinning wheel as insurance.

Gandhi went on in great detail about the economic logic of the spinning wheel as famine relief. He gave figures for the cost of a spinning wheel, the amount to be paid to the famine stricken labor, finally giving a total amount that will reach the woman in the family to run the household. And then he went on to connect the project of relief to the project of consumption—for the nation. He wrote, “The whole of the yarn that may be produced by the famine-stricken people would be used by the nation.” In such a presentation he portrayed the disaster victims not as helpless consumers of relief but as productive members of the national community.

Emphasizing the need for involvement of the nation’s people in the relief project, Gandhi critiqued the government’s relief effort as a “waste of benevolence,” that makes “people more and more helpless.” He elaborated in his notes\textsuperscript{197} that government relief only consists of tearing down and building roads and pays minimal wages. A similar critique of state-sponsored relief is present in SEWA’s discourse wherein the state’s relief employment is critiqued as “exploitation of the vulnerable, sanctioned by the state.”\textsuperscript{198} Government led relief programs attempt to provide employment to the rural poor by having them work on “digging and filling holes,” with the intention to build public assets, like roads. However, such projects are rarely completed and there is no sensitivity to the workers working in the hot summer who are digging on parched land. Such forms of relief, SEWA contends, often lead to more hunger and death. SEWA women also question the government’s intentions by asking, “Why when we have had so many disasters, at least one each year, has the government still not been able to work out a strategy for disaster relief?” In both Gandhian and SEWA’s thinking the state is removed from its position as ‘annadaata’ or provider by showing the state’s inability or disinterest in serving the people of the nation.\textsuperscript{199} Thus they both argue for an increased power in non-state actors, driven by a sense of selfless service, and yet cognizant of the connection between self-development and development of the community.

\textsuperscript{197} CWMG: 24.
\textsuperscript{198} Bat. 2006. (30).
\textsuperscript{199} I am aware that the two states (and their time frames) that I am talking about here are very different with one being a colonial state and the other a democratic state elected by the people. However, my intention here is not to compare these states but to show how Gandhian and SEWA discourses critique the state and position power in the hands of the people by dislocating it from the hands of the state.
In the current climate of encouraging a push towards liberalization, the rhetoric of seva achieves its climax. As I discussed in the section on the concept of seva in the beginning of this chapter, liberalization enables social seva to escape the hold of state. Social service becomes an open field in which anyone can participate. With its connotations of selflessness, the ‘non-profit’ sector gains a moral currency and is able to engage in social reconstruction in a heightened capacity. Without dependence on state funds, and with support from both the local, and the global community, seva becomes an important medium through which a gendered national identity is being constructed in liberalizing India.

While the adversary to nationalist politics in colonial India was the colonial state, in liberalizing India, the notion of the global political economy provides the impetus for an increased nationalistic politics. The notion of seva becomes relevant not just as a site for performing one’s duty as a citizen of the nation but also becomes the site where new solidarities are constructed and national subjects are produced. It is as much a site of consumption of the nation as it is of the production of one.

**Summary**

I began this chapter by providing an insight into the socio-spatial practice of seva and its various materializations spatially and historically. I showed how the discourse of seva operates within the socially constructed scales of the family, within households, and in public space. I also discussed the historical shifts in the politicization of the discourse of seva. In my discussion on the scales of seva, I presented a brief review of
the human geographic understanding of scale as a social construction, and argued that
SEWA strategically utilizes multiple scales in order to gain access to different
resources. SEWA’s strategic construction of their scale of praxis as local, regional,
national, or global holds particular resonance now with economic liberalization at the
national scale and a Hindu nationalist government at the regional and national scale. I
examined in my discussion on postcolonial seva how the dynamics between the state,
civil society and populations are shifting as the liberalized Indian state retreats from
its public service responsibilities. The increased power of non-state actors in welfare
and service work has resulted in state-centered perspectives of nationalism being
challenged and we see a multitude of national imaginings ranging from
fundamentalist Hindu nationalism to secular imaginings of a Gandhian nation. In the
section of gendered seva, I showed how the spatial performance of seva is productive
of notions of appropriate women’s and men’s roles as familial and national subjects.

In this study of the socio-spatial practice of seva, locality emerges as a powerful and
productive site. I argued that face-to-face interactions that occur in times of disaster
relief help consolidate the solidarity of the nation—for nations just don’t need to be
imagined in abstract space they need to be instituted and performed in actual physical
settings. The performance of seva is one such site through which national
subjectivities get constructed. I showed how Gandhi and his legacy are central to the
participation of women in public and private spaces. I drew parallels between the
Gandhian praxis of disaster relief and the manner in which women in SEWA
understand disaster relief. In both scenarios sites of relief become sites where the
nation, gender, the state, civil society, and populations interact in complex ways. The explorations in this chapter connecting a postcolonial understanding of the nation and the state, a feminist understanding of the construction of gender through seva, and a geographic understanding of the construction and manipulation of scale(s); provide a backdrop for the ethnography of SEWA in relief.
CHAPTER THREE
Relief as SEWA

Introduction

In *Hind Swaraj*, which Gandhi wrote as a dialogue between a reader and an editor (Gandhi himself); the reader comments: “all the disadvantages of railways are more than counterbalanced by the fact that it is due to them that we see in India the new spirit of nationalism.” Gandhi argued that it was not the railways, but the actual physical intimacy enabled by slow travel that had produced the nation, even before the British.

Editor: I do not wish to suggest that because we are one nation we had no differences, but it is submitted that our leading men traveled throughout India either on foot or in bullock-carts. We learned one another’s languages, and there was no aloofness between them.200

By relating this abstract from Gandhi’s discussion of problems with ‘modern civilization,’ I do not intend to call for a return to any idealized past. My purpose is to use Gandhian thought to enrich our understanding of the geographic spread of nationalism. In the previous chapters, I argued for a closer look at locality as productive of national identities: the idea that performances and discourses like seva are situated in and draw meaning from particular places and in turn produce these places. I suggested that the limited attention paid to the local face-to-face interaction that also constitutes ‘imagined community,’ has to do with the geographic discourse of the local as marginal in relation to national and global agents, and the fact that for

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the most part, such on-the-ground work is done by women, and viewed as work that “they anyways do.”

Lynn Staeheli identifies two approaches within the sub-discipline of political geography: One, the masculinist approach that focuses on the global and international geopolitics as its privileged scale of analysis; Second, the feminist approach that emphasizes the local as a site of everyday politics and resistance. Feminist geographers have consistently urged scholars to look beyond the conventional spaces and scales to understand politics, domination, and resistance as interconnected processes. In this chapter, I contribute towards this feminist geographic trajectory by focusing on SEWA’s everyday spaces and scales of operation that might not appear political in the first instance.

I show how SEWA, a poor working-class women’s organization that works in local places articulates discourses for national development and global community. I discuss how the discourse of relief work as seva constructs SEWA, the organization and how this discourse intersects with SEWA’s discourse of a Gandhian nation. In bringing the multiple discourses (SEWA as refuge, SEWA as mother’s home, SEWA’s secular Gandhian nation, women as more peaceful, all religions are one and so on) in relation with each other, I play close attention to the mutual construction of space and scale that accompanies the multiple descriptions of SEWA’s identity. My emphasis will be on the everyday and the mundane work of SEWA women and the local neighborly links they make. I also draw from Geraldine Pratt’s discussion on the

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201 Staehli. 2001.
'Geographies of Democracy’ where she discusses the process of building solidarities, “it is through the concrete details of our lives that we develop affinities, and the milieu in which we live are powerfully concrete.”202 In discussing Butler and Young, through a geographic lens, Pratt shows that identities are a constructed as a set of serialities, that are “always partial, never a totality” and depend upon what brings a group together in relation to each other. I intend to show how SEWA’s self positioning as local actors, as agents of women’s empowerment (which I read as feminist), as nationalists, and as members of the global community need not be mutually exclusive. Such a project, to use Pratt’s words “leads us back to the empirical.”203

Relief as seva, relief as SEWA

Voluntary spirit is not a means to a higher democratic end. Voluntary spirit is itself the higher democratic end.

Bhatt204

SEWA women explain their work in relief as an act of service for their fellow sisters and simultaneously describe it as work for national development. They see this work as central to sustaining the solidarity of their organization. It is understood as essential to SEWA’s existence. In many ways relief work defines SEWA’s identity. I see everything that SEWA does as a form of relief and in that sense relief work produces SEWA. It produces SEWA ideologically, as an organization of the poor working-class woman, and it produces SEWA literally, in numbers, as “each time

203 Ibid. (90).
204 Bhatt. 1999. (15).
there is a natural disaster SEWA’s membership grows.” By doing relief work at times of ‘national’ crises or disasters SEWA establishes itself as a responsible and worthy citizen not just of the nation that it imagines, but also the Indian state that it often substitutes for, as welfare provider. At the same time SEWA’s relief work produces subjects for SEWA’s ideal nation and for the post-liberalization Indian state.

I explore the relationship between SEWA’s relief work and the identities of the organization and that of the women who constitute it. I argue that through relief work SEWA women constitute themselves, create SEWA the organization, produce their Gandhian nation, and attempt to reconfigure the state. In order to do so, I narrate the story of SEWA as it emerged in the 1970s amidst mill closures and how it defines itself with(in) and against the TLA and the Indian nation-state. The story shows the mutual construction of gender, class, religious and national identities performed through the act of service.

The focus of this dissertation is on relief work done by SEWA women after the recent large-scale disasters and yet I tell the story that spans SEWA’s origins in the 1970s to its on-going work in Shantipath centers. My reason for narrating a thirty-five year story for analyzing less than five years of relief work is to reveal the centrality of relief to SEWA’s existence. SEWA has always been doing relief work. In fact everything that SEWA does can be understood as relief. As poor women who depend on their everyday earnings to sustain, each day is a potential disaster. A small event such as a political rally that displaces the street vendors from work on the street for
the day translates into a day without earnings. A day without earning could mean a
day without food, a day without medicine, a default on a loan payment, and a day of
family clashes, as the woman is unable to fulfill the demands of her husband, and his
family. Much of SEWA’s work focuses on relief for these kinds of potential disasters
and so I relate the story of SEWA as a story of relief work “everyday.” Work in the
relief camps was not an independent and disconnected involvement for SEWA
women—this was work they had “always done.” As Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA
writes, “such man-made disasters have become so frequent and overwhelming that it
seems SEWA is forced to work primarily in relief operations rather than continue its
developmental work.”

SEWA’s developmental work differs in many ways from the ideas of development
pursued by the Indian nation-state after independence. While Nehru saw large dams
and big industries as central to India’s development, SEWA speaks about social
security for the poor. While the nation hails its jawans (soldiers), kissans (farmers),
and more recently vigyanics (scientists) as heroes, celebrating images of a male
soldier holding a rifle, a male farmer riding a tractor, and a male scientist inventing
the atomic bomb; SEWA women claim their citizenship on the basis of their ‘humble
service.’ SEWA women fight for their rights using the liberal language of equal
citizenship and rights and at the same time they describe their relief work and
developmental work in the traditional gendered rhetoric of ‘womanly selfless
service.’

205 Bhatt. 2006. (22).
SEWA: It’s my mother’s home

SEWA is my mother. Whenever I am in need I know I can rely on SEWA. She will take me in her arms, listen to my woes and help me get back on my feet again. It is only because of SEWA that I am who I am today.

Mahimaben

The mother’s home in Indian folklore and myths always stands as a sanctuary: A place where a daughter can come in and seek refuge from the harsh outside world. In reality, the maternal home is considered a daughter’s temporary residence, a place she one day has to leave, one where she is viewed as paraya dhan (some one else’s property). Yet, many women in SEWA ascribe a maternal image to SEWA, others see SEWA as a savior, and yet others feel that they have now acquired the responsibility of a mother by becoming members of SEWA. SEWA came into being as an organization in the early seventies to provide such a ‘safe place’ for the poor self-employed women of Ahmedabad. SEWA was seen as a place where vendors could go and seek legal help for retaining their generations old space in the main market, or as a place where garment workers could go when the contractors cheated them, or when raw material suppliers unreasonably hiked their prices. In an environment in which textile mills that were the backbone of Ahmedabad’s economy were closing rapidly and workers were getting laid off at a moment’s notice and being forced into the ‘informal’ sector, SEWA became the site of relief, of support, and of counsel. SEWA grew out of a socio-economic disaster—the disaster that changed the lives of women and men who for the most part had been a gainfully employed labor force at the mills.
SEWA’s history is intricately entangled with the history of Ahmedabad’s textile industry. Ahmedabad of the 1910s had a vibrant mill culture that attracted numerous men and women from other parts of India to come to the city for work.206 With the formation of the Textile Labor Association (hereafter TLA), Ahmedabad became known as a workers’ paradise—a place where formal employment in the mills came with comparatively adequate housing, health benefits and social security protections. The TLA,207 founded in 1914 by Anasuyaben Sarabhai (the sister of a large mill owner) along with Gandhi’s support, was India’s first labor union of textile workers. As a Gandhian labor union, the TLA emphasized negotiation over conflict, non-violent struggle and a relationship of mutual dependence between labor power and capital.208 Not surprisingly over 70% of the TLA’s budget in the 1920s was devoted to social welfare programs such as worker literacy, childcare, healthcare and a cooperative savings society.209 Central also to the agenda of the TLA was a social reform movement, led by Gandhi to “instill discipline” and a “higher moral standard” in the working classes the majority of whom belonged to the lower castes.210

206 The first textile mill was established in Ahmedabad in 1861. For a detailed history and anthropological study of the textile industry in Ahmedabad see Breman, Jan. 2003. The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class. New Delhi: Oxford University Class.
207 Known in Hindi and Gujarati as the Majoor Mahajan Sangh
210 The division of labor inside the mills was rigidly hierarchical and based on religion, caste and gender. There was no attempt on the part of the TLA to question such a structure, which extended much beyond the walls of the mills into the segregated residential quarters.
In 1925, about 20% of those who worked in the mills were women\textsuperscript{211} and by 1954 a separate women’s wing was formed within the TLA. The women’s wing focused not just on the women workers but became active in training the wives and daughters of the mill workers in skills such as embroidery, knitting, spinning, stenography and “household management.” Consistent with TLA’s social reform objective and Gandhi’s constructive program the women’s wing provided services to women albeit with the aim of teaching “new values” to “tradition bound, superstitious and illiterate women.”\textsuperscript{212} In 1968, Ela Bhatt, a lawyer by training, joined the TLA as the director of the women’s wing. A few years later, Ela Bhatt was approached by a group of women who worked as head loaders for a labor contractor and were unable to find affordable housing in their city of work, Ahmedabad. Out of this meeting and subsequent organized public gatherings of self-employed women grew SEWA, the self-employed women’s association.\textsuperscript{213}

The TLA publications list SEWA as “ideologically and financially dependent on TLA,” and as an organization that grew out of TLA’s developmental efforts. SEWA women on the other hand tell the story of SEWA as growing out of the self-employed women’s own initiative and organizing. The TLA, although formed by a woman (Anasuyaben), was a male-dominated organization in which interestingly none of the members of the executive committee were the workers themselves.\textsuperscript{214} The Royal

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{214} Labour Report. 1931. Royal Commission on Labour in India.
\end{footnotesize}
Commission on Labor in India (1931) described the TLA as a “union managed more for the workers than by the workers.” TLA’s approach to SEWA too was paternalistic, and they saw it as just a women’s wing to extend TLA’s social reform ideology to the women. The following quote in the Labor Chronicle, an English language publication put out by the TLA, demonstrates such an attitude:

By the consistent service among these women, T.L.A. and its women's wing have established that it is possible not only to motivate these women but also encourage them to stand on their own legs and above all shed age-old prejudices and customs that have stood in the way of their emancipation and uplift. SEWA runs a, creche service for the self-employed women. Though the service is meant to provide a place for leaving the children while their mothers were at work, subtly this service teaches cleanliness to these women. These women who normally do not care for cleanliness have now learnt to bring the children to the creche after washing them, combing the hair dressed with clean clothes. This is how SEWA inculcates new values in these women.

SEWA’s work, as depicted by the TLA’s publications, was about creating the appropriate gendered, urbanized subject for a modernizing India. However, while this description tends to view the poor self-employed woman as an object of reform rather than an agent; within SEWA the women always saw themselves as active agents in shaping their own subjectivities. After an extended legal battle SEWA was registered as a trade union in 1972. This was particularly significant as it redefined the meaning of a trade union, of a worker, and of a woman. Since the self-employed women had no formal employer they were not seen as workers. Moreover, they belonged to so many different trades, what were they to unionize against? Ela Bhatt reimagined the conception of what a trade union meant and argued that “a union is about coming together. Women need not come together against anyone; they just needed to come together for themselves.”

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216 1977. (143).
217 2006. (8 ).
forming a union affirmed the women’s identity as workers and increased their bargaining power as individuals and as a collective. Many women claim that it enhanced their position in the household as they became the major breadwinners for the family. In Mahimaben’s words “One who gets the roti into the house gets to have the say. That is a universal rule.”

SEWA women today have a strong presence in Ahmedabad and almost everyone knows the SEWA women in their neighborhood. They inspire awe, respect, fear, envy, and emulation from those that come in contact with them. For example, when hiring a rickshaw from outside the SEWA office it is almost a guarantee that one would be quoted a fair price. It seemed to me that the male rickshaw pullers were either in fear of, or had a lot of respect for, those coming out of the SEWA building. Many have wives, daughters, and sisters working in there. On many occasions when I was accompanying SEWA workers on their field visits or if Meeraben was accompanying me to a respondents house, we would come out of the building and she would sit on the rickshaw seat gesturing me to sit down beside her. She would then signal to the rickshaw puller by saying chalo (let’s go). She would direct him to our destination and ask me to hand him whatever she thought was fair price—there never was any argument and he accepted what he was offered.218 These women are viewed as Durga—the powerful Hindu goddess rather than as Gandhi’s ideal Sita—the long-suffering wife of Hindu God Rama even as they use their ‘feminine’ qualities to negotiate their way in social and political struggles.

218 This was quite in contrast to my other excursions on the rickshaw with my middle-class friends in Ahmedabad where price was settled before we embarked on the journey.
The decision to call themselves self-employed rather than informal or marginal was a conscious one meant to highlight the growing centrality of the informal sector to the economy. Women in the SEWA office often question such demarcations and categorizations and ask: “Marginal to what? We are the majority.” They want to see themselves as the mainstream, as the core—not the periphery. Consistent with SEWA’s political project of (re)creating a political and economic space for the working-class woman, SEWA has been expanding in numerous directions. The SEWA bank for poor women was established in 1974 and SEWA started organizing women into trade groups and cooperatives.

Meanwhile the textile industry was on the decline and workers, primarily women to begin with, followed by low skilled workers were being dismissed. Tensions and disputes within the TLA also grew, and as SEWA began to assert more independence in thought and action, its relationship with the TLA also deteriorated. During the caste-class violence in 1981, SEWA passed a resolution in support of the lower castes and appealed to the people of Ahmedabad for peace. Such an action went against the TLA as all of their leaders were upper caste and class, and TLA’s official policy was to “not take sides.” Besides, by this time SEWA had acquired an international reputation, and SEWA leaders were being honored in international circles. Ela Bhatt claims that this attention, invitations to visit foreign countries, and the crowd of journalists interested in SEWA were difficult to handle for the male-dominated TLA. They had always thought of SEWA as their own creation, one that they would ‘take care’ of, so to see the women gain an independent and prominent identity was more than the TLA could accept. SEWA
was asked to leave and move its office away from TLA headquarters. The TLA withdrew its deposits from the SEWA bank leaving SEWA to collapse or rebuild itself independently.

At the point of the break in 1981, women constituted a mere 4% of the workforce in the textile mills and were looked as ‘dispensable,’ ‘expensive,’ and ‘more suited to house work than to earning higher wages.’ Mahimaben, SEWA’s elected officer, explained the struggle in the initial years:

30 years back no one paid any attention to our efforts. The men in the TLA used to laugh and say—have you ever heard of a women’s union. Why would women want to leave their children and make a union. Imagine if women went and sat in meetings for hours, who is going to take care of their household work.

This thinking changed when everyone lost their jobs. Then our men thought—if the woman is going out, it is not to do bad work. She is going out so that her work may be a service to her family, her community—she has to after all feed her children. Then they stopped bothering us.

The unemployment of women and men, and the subsequent closing down of the textile mills led to a substantial increase in the informal sector. The popular understanding in Ahmedabad assigns a gender perspective to how men and women coped with the loss of formal employment. While the loss of jobs led women to seek alternative forms of earning money even if such employment was considered below their status—such as picking and recycling garbage, tailoring and rolling bidis\textsuperscript{219} and agarbatis,\textsuperscript{220} men often took to drinking and lamenting about the injustice.\textsuperscript{221} The

\textsuperscript{219} Hand-rolled cigarettes\n\textsuperscript{220} Incense sticks\n\textsuperscript{221} This was a common perception expressed by many SEWA women with whom I spoke to during my study.
increased burden of running the household and doing both outside and domestic work led many women to become associated with SEWA. SEWA has also focused on constantly working out newer ways to help self-employed women cope with the pressures of the de-industrializing and changing socio-economic structure of Ahmedabad.

I read the formation of SEWA itself as an act of relief work. At a time when men and women were losing their formal employment SEWA helped them claim and maintain their identity as workers. When they were being disposed off by the mill owners, SEWA reclaimed them and helped them start new lives as self-employed workers. SEWA became the mother’s house for the harassed daughter who is thrown out of her husband’s house. After all as Mahimaben says, “The main reason for my joining SEWA is that I am a divorcee. I do not have a husband’s house to go to. SEWA is now my family.”

The reference to SEWA as a mother’s home is not without significance—it is perhaps a deliberate gesture by SEWA women. It challenges two gendered socio-spatial norms: one that of daughter as paraya dhan, who would leave her parental home upon marriage; and the other of a mother who most likely will not have a house to call her own. Current and past depictions of SEWA have always denoted it as a place of refuge, a sheltered place (see Figure 3.2). The shelter interestingly is provided by the leaves of a banyan tree, with the leaves being the SEWA members themselves. SEWA women are their own caretakers, self-reliant and self-dependent. Moreover, as the twigs of the banyan tree branch out and make independent roots, they never loose their connection with the main trunk—the mother. This is a mother’s house that
SEWA women will never leave. However, in reality how many mothers, or for that matter how many women in Gujarat will have a house to call their own, where they can give refuge to whom they chose? SEWA works consciously towards this goal of helping women build their own assets, “in their own name.” Any loan from the SEWA bank, for any kind of asset building, including that for building or repairing one’s home, requires that the house be in the name of the SEWA woman. In pursuing the Gandhian goal of *swaraj*, SEWA women challenge both the restrictive gendered and religious traditions and redefine these in empowering ways.
Figure 3.1: Ela Bhatt with women’s wing of the TLA, a precursor to SEWA
Figure 3.2: SEWA as refuge.

SEWA here is represented as a tree that shelters the numerous unions and cooperatives formed by its members. While these unions and cooperatives also have independent roots they are intricately connected to the main tree (the mother) that provides for them (social security). Also interesting is the main focus of the text as being ‘member’ written in the center of the tree. The members of SEWA are both the caretakers and those in need of relief.

Source: www.SEWA.org
SEWA: Relief everyday, always

I come from a middle-class family and in the 1980s I came to SEWA to do my internship. I was a student of textile design and wanted to work with traditional weavers and block printers. Then just as I was about to finish my work in SEWA and go back to my middle-class lifestyle, the riots broke out. Many SEWA women were affected and they moved into relief camps. The city came to a standstill for two months—of course it was still not as bad as this time around. I found myself doing relief work in relief camps. The two months just flew by and I was constantly on my feet doing relief work. As you can see I am still in SEWA and still doing relief work. All my classmates from college went to glamorous fields like fashion design, they must be earning big money now and some also have become famous. I had it in me to serve and do something relevant for the country.

Pratibhaben222, elected officer SEWA

Pratibhaben sits in her office inside the SEWA union building whenever she is doing union-related work. At other times, she can be found on the other side of Ellisbridge in the SEWA Academy building, managing the SEWA research projects. In the union building she seems like just another union worker, while at the academy she appears quite like an academic immersed in analyzing the effects of globalization on poor women. I volunteered at the SEWA academy and saw her almost everyday as she assigned specific tasks with the major one being to write a proposal for the creation of a SEWA National Academy—a university for poor self-employed women in which they would train to become barefoot doctors, engineers and lawyers.223 The intent was that once trained, these barefoot professionals would go into the countryside and serve the rural poor with their skills. Despite my close interactions with Pratibhaben at the academy, I chose to interview her at the union building.

222 Pratibhaben told me that she is the last middle-class woman to be elected to the executive council. The SEWA assembly has recently decided that only poor self-employed women can now stand for election to the executive council.
223 Barefoot here is a term used for grassroots workers. Often barefoot workers do not have the formal education but have had intensive skills training in tasks such as childbirth, repairing of tube-wells, electrical maintenance, or the legal aspects of property ownership, labor rights and women’s rights.
In the union building there is always a constant flow of women going in and going out. Many come with problems that they need SEWA’s help to resolve. The problems are usually about a contractor who is disregarding a contract, or about a seller who has suddenly hiked the price, and then at times about the health of their children, or husband, or the filth in the slums where they live and a government official’s careless attitude. Pratibhaben explained the flow to me: “The women come here with their burdens and the other women get together and think up solutions to help them.” If the number of women walking in and out of the union building is any indication, my reading is that SEWA is forever engaged in some sort of relief and rehabilitation. Someone may have just lost a long-standing contract or someone’s husband ran away with her ‘means of production.’ Listening to these women’s problems and providing some sort of relief defines much of what SEWA does.

There is an interesting juxtaposition in the way SEWA workers use the terms relief, seva, and self-help: they claim to be doing all three. The women who are providing relief consider themselves to be doing seva, as much of the time it goes beyond their assigned duties in SEWA and is unpaid. The relief that SEWA provides in most cases is related to the woman’s getting back to her economic work and often is termed as self-help. The women help themselves by getting back to their work and earning their own livelihood. The same woman can at one time be a victim of disaster and in

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224 The ‘self-help’ notion can be looked at as a governmental strategy to shift their welfare and social responsibilities and make them into matters of individual responsibility. Such a shift always accompanies neo-liberal rationality. See Lemke, Thomas. “Foucault, Governmentality and Critique” in *Rethinking Marxism* 14:3. Moreover this creation of the responsible subject also intersects with the creation of the moral subject (one who performs seva) who is responsible not just for themselves but for others (community, nation) as well – again taking up the load of the state upon themselves.
need of relief, while at another time she may have regained her strength and be
serving women affected by another disaster. SEWA is a sisterhood of self-employed
poor workers who see themselves as central to the nation’s and the world’s economy.
SEWA women do not see their relief work as an isolated one-time involvement. It is a
continuous part of their existence. The notion that SEWA has always been doing
relief work came up again and again during my conversations with SEWA women.

So some NGOs will come and distribute clothes and take some pictures. Someone
will come and interview women and write an article in the newspaper—in that they
will ask some people how they feel. That is good too. Someone is at least asking them
how they feel. But SEWA is not doing just that. OK we do work in the relief camp.
But they will close and everyone will go home. SEWA will not stop there. Through
our continuous involvement we want to bring about change (parivartan).

Mahimaben

All the officials at the camp knew us. We are not some new NGO that got formed
during the riots. We have been doing relief work for 30 years. We have been there
with the women through all the disasters in the 1980s and the 1990s. The municipal
corporator knew that and he supported us.

Pratibhaben

Initially, in the 1980s my parents used to object. Why do you need to go out in the
middle of the conflict? They would ask me. Now they have seen my work over so
many years. They know SEWA would not be able to sustain if we did not hold
together in times of distress. Now no one ever stops me.

Rohiniben

Every year there is a new disaster and those of us who earn our livelihood from day to
day are the worst affected. SEWA has to get involved each time there is a drought, or
a cyclone or an earthquake or a riot. There is something or the other every year. We
in SEWA know the value of relief and no one ever refuses to go.

Manilaben

In the voices of these women it is easy to hear a sense of connectivity to their locality
and to the other self-employed women. SEWA women position themselves as a local
everyday force in the region, in contrast with the short-term new NGOs that come from outside. In essence they see themselves as more rooted and are also seen as such by many major international organizations. The International Labor Organization (ILO), the World Bank or the Red Cross all have projects ongoing in the region in which SEWA acts as the actual grassroots workforce. The Government of India and the Government of Gujarat have at various times subcontracted some of their welfare duties to SEWA. For example, after the riots, the Government of Gujarat assigned SEWA the task of taking care of the widows and their children by providing them education and employment. In all these relationships and partnerships SEWA’s on-the-ground and local status are highlighted.

SEWA networks extend deep into the local landscape. SEWA women become ‘like close family members’ as they continue to work along with each other over the years. SEWA organizers also maintain a very close contact with their members, visiting them at least once a month and having them come over to the SEWA office for some sort of training often. Pratibhaben was very emphatic about the need for this connection: “It is either for a health related topic say maternal well being or a class on upgrading skills or it is for information on new saving schemes. For one reason or the other we always ask them to come into SEWA. It is important to maintain the link, if that breaks then all our efforts will be wasted.”

Relief work serves as a critical component of the need to make and sustain the links. During times of distress, not only are many of the existing links strengthened but also
many more are established. Pratibhaben and the SEWA academy have been doing extensive data collection and surveys on their membership. On the basis of those Pratibhaben claims, “Each time there is a disaster and we provide relief, our membership grows. This time we gained a whole new generation.”

SEWA’s spatial networks and the consistent and constant face-to-face contact that SEWA’s relief work demands plays an important role in building solidarity within SEWA and serves to spread SEWA’s vision of a Gandhian nation. SEWA articulates its vision of a Gandhian nation much more directly in its Shantipath Kendras.

**SEWA’s Shantipath Kendra: Towards a Gandhian nation?**

Almost any conversation about the riots in SEWA starts with the lament: What happened to Gandhi’s Gujarat? Is this the nation our Gandhi worked so hard to build? We are all brothers and sisters, why do people forget that? SEWA’s discourse of the Gandhian nation reconstructs a past in which struggles were just, leaders were true, and people lived in solidarity. The idea of the Gandhian nation also gives SEWA a future towards which it wishes to work. The idea that this Gandhian nation has suffered greatly, and is need of relief and rehabilitation guides SEWA’s ideology. As the women get together they sing their very patriotic sounding song for their Gandhian nation:

Gandhi is our leader, Gandhi is our leader  
We are not going to drown  
We shall cross whichever river  
We are not going to drown  
For Gandhi is our leader

SEWA’s explicitly stated Gandhian ideology translates into all of its projects as pedagogical endeavors and as a means to construct solidarity. Their pedagogical endeavor, related to disaster relief, continues today in their Shantipath kendras or centers for peace. Unlike the relief camps that had closed down before my arrival in Gujarat, the Shantipath Kendras are still operational as extensions of SEWA’s relief efforts. SEWA runs Shantipath Kendras in many of the same areas in which it worked in relief camps. These are some of the most volatile areas and also zones where Hindu and Muslim houses are located within close proximity of each other. In Meeraben’s words:

“This is one place where we can keep track of the well-being of our shantaben226 and others whom we provided relief to in the camps. Like I have told you before SEWA is not a one time relief provider—it sticks with you. We ask the women to come here, to the center, once a month and we organize programs for them.

The Shantipath Kendras that I visited were usually a one-room hutment amidst a dense network of narrow streets and small temporary looking houses. One of them had a childcare center that was operational in a house adjacent to it. I conducted one of the focus groups in a Shantipath Kendra that Meeraben had arranged to be in the format of a regular Shantipath Kendra meeting. Here I spoke to women, new SEWA members who had lived in relief camps and were now associated with SEWA. They all live in the houses surrounding the Kendra. The room had a table, some files, a chair, and a large floor mat. We all sat in a circle on that mat. It was very hot and

226 Shantaben is SEWA’s term for the widows of the 2002 violence. Shantaben translates as peaceful sister and SEWA is supporting 231 Shantabens in terms of employment, housing, healthcare and education for their children. This SEWA project is in collaboration with the state (of Gujarat) government although SEWA claims that it was the one who initiated it. Shantabens are not easily visible. SEWA claims that they are still in mourning, or are afraid to come out of their homes. However, SEWA’s Shantipath Kendra is one place where SEWA workers try to “get these women out of their houses.”
there was no electricity. The women kept apologizing to me about the Ahmedabad heat and the power-cut, occasionally getting up to fan me with a newspaper. I had to physically stop them from doing so. Two SEWA workers were present, Meeraben and Reemaben. They had accompanied me to the center and their presence very obviously affected the dynamics of the conversation.227

Meeraben began the session by reciting the *sarvadharma* prayer, which includes couplets from both Hindu and Muslim prayers. She then explained to me the purpose of this center:

For a long time we at SEWA did not pay much attention to the importance of religion in our member’s lives. However, each time communal violence has broken out in the city, we have found out that it is the informal sector workers who suffer the most. No one can work for days and the women suffer an immense loss. We cannot ignore religion anymore.

Reemaben added: Yes, and it is also always the women who suffer the most in these religious *toofans*. The men get charged up and go out to fight. In the end they get killed or arrested and the woman has to bear the brunt of taking care of the kids.

The women in the group all seemed to agree and nodded along with Reemaben.

Meeraben: This is why SEWA has started these *Shantipath Kendras*. It is to promote an understanding about each other’s religious beliefs. If we read carefully the Koran says the same things as the Geeta, we are all the same. After all we are part of the same nation (*desh*) and would like to see it develop.

A woman from the group spoke up: Yes, we are all the same. This is why, to give us the message of togetherness, nature arranged for Diwali and Id to fall next to each other this year.

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227 While I had planned to conduct it as a focus group and had gone in with my list of questions, Meeraben’s idea was to use this as an opportunity to again stress SEWA’s message about religious commonalities and peace. I don’t know if her audience was the women or me, but I just let her go as I felt it might lead to important insights about the dynamic between her and the other women at the Kendra.
Another woman from the group: And we celebrated the festivals together in this Kendra.

I asked what they did for the celebration.

Meeraben: SEWA arranged the celebrations. The women, between 60-70 of them attended. They exchanged greetings. SEWA reiterated the message to them Ishwar and Allah are one. The women cooked traditional sweets and everyone shared in the feast. We ate together.

The women hardly ever received an opportunity to speak, and for the most part it was a monologue from Meeraben. Even as I sought to interrupt at times to ask the other women a question, for the most part Meeraben quickly jumped to answer it. Nevertheless, the interaction illustrated to me some of the power relations that exist within SEWA even as it seeks to remove all differences.

Diwali and Id are just one occasion, where Hindu and Muslim women are called in at the Shantipath Kendras to celebrate together, to show that they are equal members of the same nation. During the month of August, just as soon as the relief camps were closing, the SEWA organized a Rakhi celebration at the Kendra. Rakhi is a Hindu festival wherein sisters tie a piece of sacred thread around the wrist of their brothers. This is the bond of protection: where a brother promises to take care of his sister and the sister prays for her brother’s long life. Numerous sweets and gifts are exchanged between the brother and the sister and the protector-protected relationship formalized.
SEWA’s *Rakhi* celebration altered the gendered dynamics of this festival and reworked it in their terms of a universal sisterhood for their ‘secular’ India. Women from both Hindu and Muslim communities were invited to participate and they tied the *Rakhi* thread on each other’s wrists. The women stuffed traditional sweets into each other’s mouths following the thread tying ceremony. They promised to take care of each other during times of crises and communal violence. The ceremony altered not just the gendered dynamics of this ritual, but also converted it from being a purely Hindu festival to a festival for SEWA’s version of a secular nation.

SEWA’s secular nation is secular in a very Gandhian sense, which is different from the meaning of secular in a liberal nation. Gandhian politics was not disconnected from religion, but used it as a central force. He said, “Politics divorced of religion, has absolutely no meaning.” Gandhi critiqued the liberal conception of secularism that relegates faith and religion to the private domain, and pointed to its parochialism in claiming for itself universality. Gandhian secularism, even as it drew more heavily on Hindu symbolism, was based on an all-inclusiveness of religion(s) much like his neighborly nationalism. SEWA takes the project of building a Gandhian secular nation very seriously. Every month at the Shantipath Kendra, SEWA organizes a

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228 SEWA’s use of the word secular also evokes Gandhian political strategies. Even as they continue to stress the sarvadharma (inclusive of all religion) aspects of their actions, it is not hard to notice that the roots of most of what constitutes their sarvadharma are Hindu. In their songbook Hindu prayers for peace are listed as Sarvadharma prayer, while the Muslim prayer is clearly marked as “Koran matho prarthna” Prayer from the Koran. Much like Gandhi there are constant references to Ram and other Hindu Gods. Their Gujarati Newsletter (meant for local women) symbolically explained the recent riots by narrating the story of Ram doing a Yagya (Hindu ritual) and Rakshashas (demons) causing trouble by throwing objects into the fire. Why such a constant suggestion of Hindu symbolism even as they seek to construct a ‘secular’ nation? Is it a strategy on the part of SEWA to draw in its Hindu members who constitute 75% of SEWA? Is the ‘secular’ public sphere in India anyways Hindu? While these questions are beyond the scope of this dissertation see Ali, Amir. 2001. Evolution of the Public Sphere in India. EPW 36: special issue June 30, 2001.

229 Quoted in Skaria. 2002.
lecture by a religious leader or priest—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jain, or Parsee.

SEWA organizes group discussions among the women where they share recipes of their traditional foods, rituals and codes of conduct. The women also talk about their concerns regarding safety and the need for peace.

While on the one hand, SEWA challenges the gendered rhetoric of men as savior and women as victim, it reconstructs another rhetoric that is equally gendered and equally Gandhian. The premise of the Shantipath kendras is that women are makers of peace, while men are the perpetuators of violence—thus naturalizing a gender difference, if not by a savior/victim dichotomy, then by a peaceful/violent one. Women at the Shantipath center shared many stories about how they used their power as mothers and wives to stop the violence during the riots:

An elderly woman in the group: I just sat there outside my house on the cot and refused to get up. I had to make sure no one got out of their houses to go and create trouble. If anyone came out I shouted at the top of my voice. I yelled at them to go right back in. This would make the other elders come out and get the young man back into the house.

A married woman in the group: I told my husband (sidha-sidha bata diya). I am the one who will have to take care of him if he comes home with a broken leg or a wound. I will not allow him to leave the house. He listened. We all (my family) moved into the relief camp, and stayed in there till they closed down. The poor cannot afford to indulge in violence, why don’t our men understand that?

Many of the women in the group explained to me that women are naturally more peaceful and self-sacrificing, arguing that “even Gandhi recognized this.”
SEWA’s Shantipath Kendras do not fit into a regular conception of what relief work might entail. However, considering SEWA’s long-term relief policy, and its commitment to working-class solidarity, these centers do appear as places in which this solidarity across a deeply felt religious divide is being (re)constructed. The relief here is not so much to the individual SEWA member, but to the organization’s ideological belief in *ekta* (unity). Moreover, one could argue that the scale of the relief in the Shantipath kendra is the nation. SEWA’s song booklet, a small Gujarati booklet called *Sewama Gavato Geet* (songs sung at SEWA) that all women at the Shantipath Kendra possess, contains songs on SEWA’s unionism, on religious unity, on women challenging exploitation, on Gandhi, and it contains songs celebrating India, including the popular *Sare Jahan Se Acha Hindustan Humara* (Our Hindustan is better than the whole world), *Vande Mataram* (Hail Motherland) and the national anthem *Jana Gana Mana*.

In addition, one also sees a commitment to the unity of humanity. One of the songs SEWA members sing is:

*Mante Nahi hain fark, Hindu, Musalman ka
Jante hai Rishta insaan se insaan ka
Dharamke, dharamke...deshke, bhasha, gair veshke
Fark ko mitayenge, ekta ko layenge*

We do not recognize the difference between Hindu and Muslim
We only recognize the relationship between human and human
Religion, nation, language and different appearance
We will remove all difference and bring unity

SEWA’s claim to a local rootedness and a global consciousness appear at odds with their commitment to their nation. However, we need to understand the dual nature of
the term ‘nation.’ While nation on the one hand, refers to a particular form of identity, or association; on the other hand, nation is merely a scalar construction. Moreover, if we pay attention to SEWA’s discourse of the nation in the context of their Gandhian ideology, we see what Sakaria calls “neighborly nationalism.” Yes, nation-states have borders but the spirit of nationalism need not be ‘limited,’ any more than the fact that any community is limited? Moreover, even if we do accept the ‘limits’ to national identity, we do not need to foreclose the possibility of communication across difference, especially if we keep in mind the notion of the nation as a socially constructed scale that is necessarily relational.

Despite the contradictions that come to light between SEWA’s collective ideology and those of it members, I think SEWA’s discourse of the nation and community could point to alternative ways of conceptualizing nationalism. These alternate conceptions become particularly significant now, in order to counter the dominant processes that are reconstructing Gujarat as the “laboratory of the Hindu Rashtra (nation).” SEWA’s report on riot rehabilitation, entitled Shantipath states:

The real task for tomorrow is the rehabilitation of “hearts and minds” of getting people to live together in the same occupations and to study together in the same schools. We have to join hands in the same organization. That is the India to which we belong. That is our tomorrow.
Summary

Much in the way that Pratt has shown for Philipinno domestic workers in Canada, SEWA women too “inhabit multiple spaces and multiple discourses.” While their marginalization as informal sector women workers brings them together and builds SEWA’s solidarity, they nevertheless also bring with them discourses on gender, nationalism, and religion amongst others—where they may or may not all inhabit the same space. However, through pedagogical endeavors such as in Shantipath Kendras which are embedded in the relief process, SEWA strives to build a common identity—on many levels. In this chapter, I discussed how relief work constitutes SEWA both ideologically and numerically. Relief work in SEWA is productive of a sense of community, a nation, and a sense of human unity. I also presented the discourse of SEWA as a mother’s home—one that challenges the socio-spatial understanding of the mother’s home as a place the daughter has to leave one day. SEWA’s relief work and method of working reveals the importance of on-the-ground labor in the construction and spread of nationalism. SEWA’s work in the Shantipath Kendras also reveals how national solidarities are created and maintained through contact in local situated places and that we need to reconceptualize our understanding of the ‘limits’ to national identity.

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CHAPTER 4

SEWA’s ‘seva’ and SEWA’s ‘work’

Introduction

In this chapter I give a sense of what is entailed in ‘doing seva,’ in the relief process. Seva is context-specific. Doing seva within one’s maternal home differs from doing seva in one’s marital home. Similarly, doing seva within a religious institution differs from doing seva as disaster relief. Sites of disaster relief are fraught with tensions, discord, despair, hope, conflict, and conciliation. These are spaces in which multiple discourses about the nation, religious identity, gender, the state, relief, and service circulate, interact, and relate to each other. Moreover, these are transitory zones in which victims come and go, where NGOs provide relief and leave, where state representatives count and contain, where the local interacts with the global, and where community is imagined, disbanded, and reimagined many times. The performance of seva in relief camps engages with these multiple discourses to produce particular subjects that are situated in the particular geographical and historical situation of a liberalizing Gujarat that is simultaneously being reworked upon by religious and secular national imaginations.

Following Pratt, I read seva as a discourse that is materialized in place to produce gendered subjects for the family, the community, the nation and the state. In this chapter, I show how the socio-spatial circuitry of seva results in the production of gendered subjects for SEWA’s Gandhian nation. The spatial practice of seva not only produces those that perform seva, but also those for whom it is performed. In this
chapter, I discuss SEWA’s seva in the relief camps to show how SEWA workers act within particular discourses of unpaid selfless service even as they construct their own discourse of working-class women’s contribution to the nation economy. Popular rhetoric constructs the working-class women as dirty, uneducated, contributing to unwanted population growth, and a drain on national resources. SEWA reworks these discourses as it reveals itself to be central to national development.

I start by presenting the interconnected spaces of the SEWA worker’s231 home, community, and the nation. Feminist geographic discussions on scale have continually emphasized that the spaces of the home, community, and the nation are socially produced in relation to each other, and that such constructions are implicated in the reproduction of the relations of gender. An illustration of SEWA worker’s interconnected public and private lives reveals these related constructions. I then go on to provide a description of the actual spaces where relief work was performed and how did SEWA workers engage with and produce that place. What spatial performances, the time-commitments, the negotiations, the distributions and the remunerations are involved? This part serves as ‘thick description’ and empirical material for a discussion of SEWA’s seva, and SEWA’s work, and how both fit with SEWA’s imagination of the nation. Towards the end, I shift locations from urban

231 Since many of those in the relief camps were also SEWA members (either before or became so after SEWA’s relief efforts). I differentiate between those who provided relief and those who received relief by referring to the former as SEWA workers (karyakarta) and for the later I either use ‘recipients of relief’ to give a general inclusivity to men, women and children in the camps or specifically SEWA members (when the recipients belong to SEWA).
Ahmedabad to rural Kutch, to show how the face-to-face contact in local places, in times of relief, works to forge SEWA’s national community.

I relate the happenings with two aims in mind. First, I want to show that even as the women describe their relief work as seva—done in a sense of volunteerism—it involves a lot of work, often back-breaking labor and dangerous tasks. ‘Seva’ that is essentially defined as self-driven, voluntary, and arising out of an ‘inner desire,’ here we see is really ‘work’ that is defined, distributed, and organized by senior SEWA members. While the other work these women do for SEWA is salaried, the work in relief camps is not. While in regular office days SEWA workers do their jobs from 9 to 5, here they are in the camps from 8 in the morning to 8 at night. The discourse of seva as ‘natural’ for women functions to disguise the exploitative gendered and class relations that emerge as a result of the local/global dynamic in a liberalizing India.

As I narrate the stories of relief, I also want to illustrate to some extent the parallel lives of the women performing relief. The reason for doing this is to show the social location of these women in their communities and the negotiations they engage in so as to perform relief. I want to show how ‘seva at home’ relates to ‘seva in the world,’ and the possible implications for the discourses of nationalism and gender. These are not middle or upper class women doing social service in their ‘spare time.’ These are poor working-class women who somehow make ends meet. They are not the kind of women who come to mind when one thinks of social service—they are meant to be the object of that service, not the subject?
My reconstruction of the relief project is based on extended conversations with SEWA relief workers and an analysis of SEWA’s extensive documentation of the process. I did not personally participate in or observe SEWA’s work in the relief camps as these had already closed down during the time of my study. The government of Gujarat was keen to establish or more appropriately portray normalcy, and the existence of relief camps did not allow for such a portrayal. However, I did participate in the Shantipath Kendras run by SEWA. Shantipath means a road to peace, and these centers established in volatile neighborhoods after the 2002 riots were an effort on the part of SEWA towards an ongoing rehabilitation of their imagined ‘Gandhian nation.’

The socio-spatial circuits of seva: Family, community, nation

On February 28, 2002, Meeraben sat in front of the TV with her husband and her 23-year-old daughter, watching the evening news in horror. She had not gone to work that day as people had told her that trouble was expected. The previous day the Sabarmati express, a train carrying Hindu karsevaks returning from the disputed Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, was burnt. The incident had happened in Godhra, a Gujarati town. Immediately, without any investigations, the Gujarat government announced this to be an act of violence by the Muslims.

Meeraben is a SEWA member and currently works as a trainer for other SEWA teachers in the adult literacy program. Meeraben is a Hindu and comes from a
working-class family. She feels lucky to have received a bachelor’s degree and strives to use it for the “benefit of SEWA sisters.” Meeraben’s family was glad she did not go out, in fact according to her “nobody ventured out for two days after Godhra.” However, while Meeraben was at home, unable to go to SEWA, she felt restless. She wanted to know what was happening to her SEWA sisters and there was no other way to contact anyone since the phone lines were also cut off. Meeraben could see from her terrace that the kabadi bazaar232 not far from her neighborhood was up in flames. She heard the elder folks in her community trying to stop the youth from leaving the neighborhood and convincing them to maintain peace.

On the third day, as Meeraben was just finishing her morning household chores, her daughter informed her that Rohiniben and Savitaben were there to meet her. Rohiniben and Savitaben are SEWA organizers and they had braved a rickshaw ride through the violent streets of the walled city to come fetch Meeraben so they could go together to inquire about their “affected sisters.” Meeraben firmly asserted that she did not hesitate even once and immediately joined them on the rickshaw, “without even changing her old sari.” Her family often joked about her commitment to SEWA, saying, “nothing, not even a high fever can stop (her) if SEWA calls.” Her daughter tried to stop her this time by arguing that there is a curfew, and expressing fear lest something might happen to Meeraben. Meeraben was determined and left along with the other SEWA organizers saying, “Nothing bad can happen to those who are doing seva.” Nevertheless, Meeraben claimed that her family was really worried about her

232 Market where junk is sorted, recycled and sold. In Ahmedabad the Kabadi market area is one of the poorest neighborhoods and is constituted primarily of Muslims and lower-caste Hindus.
and no one would eat dinner before she returned home at night. Even though she was outside the spatial confines of her house and thus geographically distanced from her family, in many other ways her whole family was involved in the relief process, psychologically and physically. Meeraben’s family members, especially her husband, are very proud of her work for the nation. Meeraben mentioned that he boasts about it to his friends as if she “is a national leader.”

Many SEWA members shared experiences like Meeraben’s as they ventured out of the safety of their homes in the initial days of violence and government-imposed curfew. More than a hundred SEWA women sought each other out to inquire about the well-being of other members of their organization. As they rode in a rickshaw to neighborhoods around their own, Meeraben and other members of the SEWA team witnessed and recorded in great detail, the losses incurred by those affected by the communal violence.

Meeraben: There was destruction everywhere. It felt strange to see the streets, these were the streets that I had walked almost everyday when I visited our SEWA sisters. Now I see burnt streets, I don’t know what happened to the families inside. Till yesterday, I knew each house, how many members in each family, who was pregnant and who was going to get married. I knew the education levels of each of the women on this street. This was like my extended family (parivaar ka hissa).

Meeraben’s narrative about what she and her SEWA sisters did in the immediate aftermath of the Godhra riots is fairly typical of what most of the senior SEWA workers do in the wake of any disaster. Even in the absence of a central institutional control or directions, SEWA workers are known to venture out in dangerous times, to
seek out other members, and to offer them support. Within trapped communities their houses often become the hub where neighbors collect and hope to be rescued, as the local SEWA worker picks up the phone to call up all the contacts she has established as a long time SEWA member.

However, it was not as easy or smooth for all SEWA workers to go out of their homes and help others. Reemaben, a SEWA child-care worker of 10 years, had to work hard to justify to her family the need to go out of the house to relief camps in the midst of violence. Reemaben is 26 years old and as an unmarried woman living with her parents and her spatial mobility is constantly under parental scrutiny and feels the need to justify her every move. Reemaben, just like most other women of her age in the region live under the gaze of not only their parents but also other relatives and neighbors and any move on their part that is outside the norm has the potential to bring shame to them and their families. Reemaben was eager to go out of her house and help during the initial days of the riot, but her father was hesitant. Initially she tried to argue with him and told him that she needed to go to the SEWA office to collect her salary. Her father declined the request by saying, “People will think that your father is more interested in your salary than in your safety.” Eventually Reemaben argued her case saying, “as a member of SEWA it was her duty to go when SEWA calls.”

Reemaben: I told him that if I do not go now I would regret it all my life. It is in me to serve, I feel that. Moreover, these are all my sisters, their families, people from my country. In SEWA we are taught that we are all one, we have to take care of each other.
She eventually convinced her father to let her go for a SEWA meeting in spite of his protests and fears that “any meeting is sure to be considered communal and dangerous.” Reemaben is short, thin-boned and with her vibrant jovial personality looks much younger than her 26 years. She feels that her youth is often misunderstood for her immaturity. Even within SEWA, she struggles to establish her worth. Reemaben’s struggles to juggle her responsibilities as a daughter in her family, a SEWA member and a member of the nation see wants to see as “developed.”

Reemaben claims that she keeps both her parents and SEWA informed about everything that she is doing. This strategy she feels builds their confidence in her and makes them comfortable with her outdoor activities. Everyday after coming back from working in the camps she tells her parents about the activities at the camp. Reemaben asserts that her parents are now very proud of their daughter’s seva and talk about her “work for the country” to all who visit them. Reemaben has decided at least for the time being not to get married. She is one of four daughters and her parents have no son. Reemaben feels that if she marries she will be unable to serve her parents in their old age and she wants to be able to “serve them just like a son.” It is important to note that seva within families, especially for one’s parents is viewed as a son’s duty—so even when a daughter takes on that role, she does it “just like a son.” Moreover, even as a daughter-in-law serves her in-laws family, she does not do so as an autonomous agent but as their son’s wife. Effectively, a woman’s service is displaced or made invisible inside the sphere of the household, even as (since the nineteenth century) it becomes visible in public space.
Both Meeraben and Reemaben insist on describing their work as work for their nation. The experience of both Meeraben (a mother) and Reemaben (a daughter) is quite illustrative of the interactions between SEWA workers, their families and the national body. They highlight the inseparability of the spheres of home, work and the nation for these women and thus reveal the mutual constitution of gendered, classed, and national identities. Both Meeraben and Reemaben used the discourse of seva as it is understood in the context of the family and extended it to their community, and the nation. Such strategic deployment of the discourse of seva liberates them in a certain way—they are able to escape the physical confines of home to go out into the world to serve. Reemaben’s father was unwilling to let her go if the going out was related to her economic activity (going to collect her salary), yet he agreed when she articulated her desire to do seva. Nevertheless, the socio-spatial practice of seva works to produce these women as subjects for whom service is a natural desire. To serve and to care for, the family, the community and the nation becomes an essentially feminine task.

Meeraben’s conversations always stressed this feminine attribute—somehow all women have this desire to serve. “So what about SEWA workers who did not, or could not for some reason not want to participate in disaster relief,” I asked. Meeraben replied, “Women were asked to commit to working at their assigned camp for as long as required and all of them volunteered.”
When I asked again that whether anyone was afraid or unwilling to do relief work for other reasons: Meeraben replied, “There were some. But we asked them. Give it in writing that you do not want to help your SEWA sisters. Today they are in need tomorrow you may be in need. This is seva for your sisters.”

When I questioned Meeraben if she thought this was coercion her answer was, “These women have to be pushed. They have a lot of potential but they also have a lot of family pressure.” The logic was that the women need the pressure from SEWA to justify leaving their families at 7 am everyday and returning home late at night. The moral authority associated with women’s seva appears to be justification enough even in difficult situations.

“Well, what about family responsibilities, some of the women must have children or elders to take care of in their own families,” I persisted.

Again the consensus amongst the responses I received was that usually there are enough people in one’s family or neighborhood to take care of the children.

The discourse of seva contains a socio-spatial hierarchy. Seva for the nation is viewed as higher than seva within the family. As SEWA workers engage in their seva for the nation, others in their social circuit do their share of seva by taking care of their

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233 I use the word consensus with the recognition that disparate voices also exist – however I did not hear many in SEWA. The ideological apparatus of the organization is very strong and as I conducted my interviews and discussions there were things, which to me appeared as if all SEWA members have committed them to memory. This did create a dilemma for me and raised questions like if these women are all going give the same answers to my questions, what sense do these interviews make? However, I have chosen to go ahead with these interviews and the data because even if the subjects of my research are ideologically produced (as all of us are), the question is how does SEWA construct such ideological reproduction and to what extent does SEWA’s relief work play a role in this?
children and homes. In either case, the burden of work lies with the woman. Layers of invisibility are added on as we move from the scale of the nation to that of the home.

In the next section, I zoom into a relief camp and its surrounding neighborhood. My aim is to give a sense of this place where SEWA workers served from 8 in the morning to 8 in the night. I also discuss how and why SEWA decided to work in particular camps.

**SEWA in relief**

A SEWA team visited 22 relief camps in Ahmedabad city\(^{234}\) within four days of the start of the riots in 2002. More than 100 SEWA workers moved around through dangerous situations, took notes, and made it to the SEWA meeting on March 4\(^{th}\); the first after the violence engulfed the state. All senior SEWA members were present, as were a majority of SEWA’s paid workforce, organizers and leaders. The meeting was a somber one. All had heard of and witnessed, if not experienced first hand, acts of extreme violence. All of the women I spoke to who had attended the meeting felt it as a test of SEWA’s strength and the unity of its Hindu and Muslim members. Elaben, SEWA’s founder, started the meeting by reaffirming SEWA’s *sarvadharma sambhavna* (compassion for all religions) principle and reminding those present of Gandhi. As with any other SEWA meeting, they sung their Gandhian prayer that includes segments from both Hindu and Muslim religions.

\(^{234}\) There were a total of 46 recognized camps. Recognized means that these camps were approved by the Government of Gujarat and received some amount of support from it, although most often the support for highly inadequate. Besides the registered camps there were numerous unregistered camps.
SEWA’s meetings are an interesting event to experience. Irrespective of whichever room they take place in, the Union building or in the Academy, these are always overcrowded with women sitting on the floor hustled next to each other and the senior members sitting in the front trying to calm everyone down. To complement these crowded meetings SEWA also holds smaller group sessions that they refer to as ‘experience sharing time’ and here the women sit around a circle usually sipping hot chai and talking. Most of the rooms in SEWA buildings have a picture of Gandhi (usually the one with Gandhi on the spinning wheel) on the wall, accompanied by pictures of Anasuyaben (founder TLA). The rooms are also full of SEWA’s posters. There are posters on SEWA literacy or banking, posters asking to “give credit where credit is due,” posters on women’s health, posters reaffirming the ekta (unity) of the women in the organization, and others asserting that “women’s rights are human rights.” Usually these are noisy, cluttered, chaotic, and exciting sessions with women eager to make their point heard.

The March 4th meeting was a little different. While it was held in a large hall, it was not as crowded. All those present shared their experience and apprised others of the situation in their part of the city. Many had already been in touch with each other and with other senior members through telephone calls. The stories the women shared spanned the spectrum from despair to hope. Some chalis had lost everything including what in SEWA’s words is most critical to their survival—their “means of production.” Women told of sewing machines they had just bought that were gutted

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235 Credit here has a double meaning. While the poster shows a women performing field labor, thus highlighting the need to recognize women’s labor; it is also in support of the micro-credit programs that SEWA runs.
and burnt. Others spoke of women in their neighborhood who had recently set up a cold-drinks business. The rioters destroyed the new freezer and all of the supplies. While most of the SEWA workers in the meeting had not experienced damage to their personal property, they all were close to someone who had. Although SEWA has a centralized office and council, they also work in a very decentralized manner when it comes to individual trade unions or neighborhood based cooperatives. For example, the vegetable vendors in the Gomtipur area have a very close-knit union where all members know each other personally. In that sense, the SEWA network expands very densely at the grassroots level, and somewhat loosely at the national and international levels. These networks played a major role during relief operations.

SEWA chose to work in five of 46 registered relief camps. Pratibhaben, one of SEWA’s elected executive committee members, explained to me that this was a hard decision to make, but since they only had limited resources they were forced to make a choice:

This was the hardest part. We knew there was a lot of need everywhere, but our resources were limited. We therefore chose camps that had a significant SEWA membership. This is not because we did not want to help non-members, we did. And we did that in the camps where we worked. But camps are not easy places to get into; there is a lot of hostility at times. We decided to go to places where our members were because they helped us gain an entry and establish a trust relationship.

Here we see a resonance with the Gandhian idea that the only way one could serve the world is by serving one’s neighbor. Pratibhaben further elaborated that they consciously chose both Hindu and Muslim camps in which to do their work.
We have always done that, we do not differentiate between Hindu and Muslim, we are all working-class and we are the worst affected during any disaster. We have members from both religions, how could we help one and not the other.

The five camps they chose were spread across the historic and deindustrialized part of the city. The largest of these was the camp at Amanchowk, Bapunagar, housing about ten thousand people, all of them Muslims. Aman Chowk, Bapunagar, like most other camps is located in the working-class neighborhoods of the city (see figure 1.2). The walled city and its immediate surrounding abandoned textile mills in Ahmedabad consist of extremely dense settlements that are also the most volatile in terms of Hindu-Muslim violence. There are narrow streets with houses on both sides. Many of these streets are difficult to walk through, especially in the night when the men spread out their cots on the outside and block most of the three feet passageway.

I visited a SEWA member in one such chali, which is what each lane is called. She lived at the end of the chali and there was a wall blocking off the street from the neighboring Muslim community right after her house. She had a one-room house that extended onto a small (approx 3 ft by 6 ft) verandah, which opened out on to the narrow street. The room had one single bed, a small TV, and a very noisy table fan. The verandah, which was a raised platform, was also their water storage and kitchen. A wooden slab covered part of the floor, below which they stored water. Municipal water was unpredictable and came only for an hour or so in the morning and so

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236 While it was critical for SEWA to express support for its Muslim members (who constitute one third of SEWA) it did not bear well with the Gujarat state authorities who imposed allegations of financial irregularities on SEWA. Very recently (2005) SEWA withdrew from all projects funded by the Gujarat state although it still collaborates with the central (federal) government in Delhi.
storing water was critical. On one side of the verandah, and also leaning against the wall at the end of the street, were many bamboo and plastic cots and an occasional bicycle. The women and the girls usually sleep inside the small room, even though it does get very stuffy in the Ahmedabad summer. The boys and the men spread out on the verandah and the street. As I walked out towards the main road, I tried to imagine how the twenty or so families that lived in this street would ever manage to run out if attacked by a mob. Luckily those on this street had been spared since they were all Hindus and displayed that identity very prominently by putting up a Ganesha, a swastika, or a Durga image on the door.

In Bapunagar, the division between Hindu and Muslim streets is very apparent, and more so after the riots. Even after a year of the riots, I could make out the burnt and destroyed houses of the Muslims on one side, and the intact, brightly painted houses of the Hindus on the other side. While at one time most of these residents had worked together in the textile mills, they are now workers in small cottage industries or are self-employed. It is commonly understood that the communal tensions rose after the closure of the mills. The Muslim chalis in the area include the Chunnilal Devashankar chali, Manilal chali, Sone ki Chali, Akbar Nagar and Urban Nagar. These were the most affected during the riots: most of the residents at the Aman chowk relief camp came from the Muslim challis and from nearby pavement dwellings, including the ones near the Bapunagar hospital and the telephone exchange. However, there were few from far-away districts such as Naroda-Patiya and Chamanpura, especially towards the last few days of the camp’s existence as they

237 Breman, 2002 and Varshney, 2001, have also empirically substantiated this.
feared returning to their own neighborhoods. Most people had fled to the camps empty-handed on the night of February 28th and then subsequently went back with some form of institutional (NGOs mostly) or friendly (a Hindu neighbor) protection to fetch some of their possessions, such as cots and clothes. Those in the Aman Chowk camp lived out in the open on a large ground that lay at the crossroads of many neighborhoods, with few trees to give them shade, holding on to their small number of possessions and the remaining members of their families. Subsequently, tents were put up; camp offices established, and mobile toilets positioned—Aman chowk, according to SEWA members resembled a mini-city with its more than 10,000 residents. The relief work in camps like Aman chowk is managed internally, with leaders from the local community (like the dargah or Madarsa committee). The discourse of seva that circulates in these camps is often exclusionary of other religious communities. SEWA is able to displace that discourse to some extent by strategic use of its local networks and members.

Rafiqbhai, the main camp organizer of the Aman Chowk, is an elected official of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, and had organized similar relief camps in the aftermath of the 1985 and 1992 riots. Owing to SEWA’s long-term work in the area and in relief efforts during previous disasters, Rafiqbhai knew SEWA and its senior members very well. This made it easier for SEWA to immediately gain an insider’s foothold in the camp where many other ‘outside’ NGOs struggled to establish their credibility. Rafiqbhai and other camp leaders from the Dargah committee offered

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238 These committee’s are mostly religion specific. The Dargah and Madarsa committees are committees associated with the local shrine and religious school.
SEWA the use of the local madarassa to house the sewing machines and other economic activity in the camps.

SEWA women are well known in the areas they work in and elected officials strive to remain on its good side. This is a well-understood fact by SEWA and is often used strategically to “get work done.” SEWA also issues all its members ID cards. These too become very useful at times when SEWA workers used these ID cards to argue with policemen to let them go through curfew areas to do relief work. In any case, Gujarati society assigns a very high status to women, at least in theory.\(^{239}\) Therefore, to incur the wrath of a Gujarati woman on the street would be considered most dishonorable. Many people in Gujarat told me that women here are free to roam around laden with gold and no one would dare touch them.\(^ {240}\) Coming from Punjab where it is difficult to come across a female vegetable vendor with a mobile handcart, I also noticed the increased public participation of women in the (informal) economy in Ahmedabad. The moral position that performing seva, being part of SEWA, and being a woman gives them is sufficient to let SEWA workers through some very tough situations with both the police and the rioters. However, seva is not just a discourse that circulates in empty space, the socio-spatial discourse of seva materializes in particular places through the labor of women and men. The discourse of seva as selfless, acts to make invisible this labor, even as it is materialized on bodies and in place.

\(^{239}\) In practice there are numerous cases of dowry killings and female infanticide reported in the daily newspapers.

\(^{240}\) This seems to be religion specific and members of one religion view only the women of their own religion/caste with ‘respect.’ There were many instances of gendered violence against women of the minority Muslim community during the 2002 riots.
Seva is hard work

During the time she was involved in disaster relief, Madenaben woke up at 4 am and immediately started on her household chores. She filled up the daily water from municipal taps, cooked the meals, packed lunch boxes, woke up the kids, bathed, dressed and fed them, washed clothes and dishes and then got ready to leave. She walked two miles to reach a spot where she had decided to meet with other SEWA sisters. Everyday at 7 am, the SEWA jeep would come to pick them up to take them to the camp where they are assigned to work that day. While most other SEWA relief workers walked or took the bus or rickshaw to reach the camp site, Madeenaben used the Jeep. The reason was that she would have to cross Lal Darwaja, a volatile area and it would not be safe for her to go there by herself. She elaborated:

To do relief work is not an easy task (*Rahat karya koi asaan to nahi hai*). It involves a lot of dangers. I was scared initially. But I had thought that I have to die one day, so why not die while doing seva. This gave me a lot of courage.

Whether by the SEWA-provided jeep, or by bus, rickshaw or by walking—SEWA relief team was at the camp at 8.00 am everyday for 6 months. The team was composed of a senior SEWA leader who managed the work, a childcare team, a healthcare team, some who worked on food, cleaning and work distribution and others from the SEWA insurance and bank. The team was a mix of Hindu and Muslim women. The general rule was that they would always move around in groups of at least 2 Hindu and 2 Muslim women even within the camp. At least one member of the team was a long-time resident or organizer for the areas served by the camp. This was critical, since in some camps there was an open hostility to members of the
opposite religion, and knowing women in the community helped. According to

Mahimaben’s account of the Bapunagar camp:

The camp organizers were very supportive of SEWA since they had worked with us before but some of the other men had never seen us. As soon as we had started our survey in the camp a group of men surrounded us. They started questioning me, “Why have you brought Hindu women into our camp, are they here to count how many of us are alive so they can go back and report to their communities, you are a traitor.” I was scared. The young girls that were in my team were my responsibility. Just as I was about to say something, a woman in the relief camp saw us and came running to us. She was crying and came and hugged Rohiniben who she knew from their union work, “Thank god you have come, we have lost everything, but I knew my SEWA sisters will come to help me.” Soon other SEWA members came and found us. We all hugged each other and cried. The men slipped away quietly. Later (Mahimaben laughs) they even came to ask us if we needed help.

SEWA’s Shantipath report gives the account of another camp:

In Dariapur, as our team arrived, we were surrounded by a sea of faces who broke down. As we all stood in tears, we felt a deep sadness for all that we had suffered. We stood for what seemed like ages on the usually busy Jordan Road. All around the perimeter, men of all ages watched silently as we, women of all communities, stood together, arms wrapped around each other.

In the tense spaces of the relief camps, SEWA’s widespread and deep local network helped reestablish solidarity and helped initiate the task of relief.

SEWA has a long tradition of starting every work with a detailed survey—it is almost like their “Ganesh puja,” their mantra. In the same tradition, SEWA relief workers started their relief work by documenting the number of members in each of the camps, their trade, their condition, and damage. They also documented the damage incurred by others in the camps but their focus was their members. The documentation did not stop after the initial survey but continued throughout the process, where each of the relief workers kept a record of all the women, men and

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241 Hindu ceremony performed to initiate any new project/life event.
children she helped. This was discussed at the frequent SEWA meetings held to consolidate survey findings and work out future relief strategies. The survey also became a useful instrument in negotiations with the state government regarding numbers in the camps, and amount of food aid, and medicines required. When outside NGOs with a particular focus like those working for pregnant women would come in, SEWA workers claimed to have been their guides, giving them exact numbers and names. While on the one hand SEWA relief workers appear as an extension of the state such that they are carrying out the governmental responsibility of the state, I also see them as an integral part of civil society that disciplines the state into providing welfare for its citizens. Moreover, being a grassroots organization SEWA is intimately connected to and constituted by what Partha Chatterjee refers to as ‘political society.’ SEWA’s relief work complicates the commonly understood dynamic between the state, civil society, and political society.

In each of the five camps, SEWA set up childcare centers to take care of children below six years of age. Here the SEWA women bathed the children, fed them and taught them songs. SEWA contacted the Government of Gujarat for help with the children’s needs and through a government’s program called Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), they were able to provide ‘healthy food’ for the children. The food itself was prepared by SEWA’s catering cooperative and then

\[242\] This consisted primarily of Sukhdi - which is made from Indiamix flour (fortified mixture of wheat and soybean flour), jaggery (raw sugarcane sugar) and ghee (clarified butter). This is a fairly common food distributed during disaster relief in the region. International organizations like the World Food Program use this combination to combat malnutrition in third-world rural children. Regional variations are also available that substitute the wheat for the staple grain available in the region such as maize. It is hailed as a low-cost nutritious meal.
distributed to the kids in the camps by the relief workers. For the older children
activity centers were established that helped them to continue with schoolwork. For
those that were illiterate SEWA literacy team held classes in the Gujarati language.
The major problem according to SEWA workers was space constraints. They were
taking care of at least 100 kids in each camp. In the midst of the chaos of the camp it
was very difficult to perform this task. Some camps were overcrowded. One camp,
the Bakar Shah Roja camp, was in the midst of graves. To set up any kind of
consistent activity in these areas, especially those for children who needed special
attention owing to their trauma was impossible. SEWA eventually sought the support
of the municipal government and wherever possible shifted the childcare activities to
nearby municipal schools. They also welcomed other NGOs that wanted to pitch in to
help with the children.

Mahimaben: Other NGOs came and asked what they can do to help us. Women
would come and help us bathe the children in our care. This was a great help for us,
since it was very tough to bathe 100 children everyday for so few of us.

Others also commented on the difficult task of taking care of the children in the
camps:

Maddenaben: The children, they don’t stay still and wait for relief to come to them.
They are all over the camp. We have to go gather them. Then they run around and we
have to make sure that they are cleaned up and well-fed. The mothers sometimes
help, but some of them—they don’t want their kids immunized, so they try to hide
them. It was a lot of struggle.

Similarly, while the SEWA health care team was present everyday at the camps they
did not work alone. SEWA coordinated with the municipal cooperation and local
government hospitals to do their health-related work. SEWA health workers provided
basic first-aid to people with burns and wounds, they distributed medicines, made referrals to hospitals and most importantly made detailed lists of how many two-year-olds needed the polio vaccine, how many kids with thalessemia needed blood transfusions, how many pregnant women had their check ups due, and how many tuberculosis patients needed to get their medicine and so on. These lists were not only handed over to the concerned governmental or non-governmental workers but SEWA workers made sure that the immunizations, examinations and prescriptions were carried through. Madenaben added, “The doctors would come and go, but we were there all the time and we knew who needed what. We had to get after the right people to get the job done.”

SEWA health workers also spoke about their womanly bonds:

Jashodhaben (a healthcare worker at SEWA): The women were so relieved that we were there. Some of them had reached their menopause and then with the *toofan*, the periods came again. They were so embarrassed to speak to the male doctor. They told us their problems and we got them the right medicines and supplies.

Mahimaben: Some women would not stop crying. Sometimes we found it hard to control ourselves too. We all sat together and cried. And then we comforted them and expressed that we are with them.

While none of the SEWA health workers spoke to me about the gendered violence that accompanied the riots, these were well documented in reports by Human Rights Commission of India, Citizens Initiative, and the All India Democratic Women’s Association. I also did not push SEWA health workers for more details on any case/incident than they divulged in the first instance as I did not want to revive some of their most traumatic memories of working in the relief camps, but Jasodhaben’s statement sums it up: “I still get goose pimples when I think of some of those women
and children.” Work in relief camps is very involving and the SEWA women were involved physically and emotionally.

Meeraben: I did not once stop to think of myself, or my family. For the 12 hours each day that I was there I forgot who I am, that I need to eat or to use the restroom. I was completely engaged in relief work and ate when I just had too and that too almost unconsciously.

Mahimaben: When you are in paid work you think, OK now it is 5 pm I have to go home. When you are doing relief work you are not thinking you are just working. You never think of yourself and believe me it is very enjoyable. We enjoyed doing relief work.

While on the one hand, there was the sense that the relief work was very hard and dangerous; the women also expressed the idea that it was ‘enjoyable.’ On the other hand, Meeraben’s comment about some women being pressurized to do seva complicates the picture.

Even as woman’s seva is made visible by being performed in a public space rather than inside the home, the discourse of seva as natural, a way for women to relate to one another makes invisible the immense amount of labor and risk involved. Why then do SEWA women who are otherwise politically conscious in terms of both gender and class struggles, continue to describe their relief work as seva? Moreover, even as they buy into or strategically use the socio-spatial circuit of seva to understand and describe their relief work; they engage in the production of yet another discourse related to the work of working-class women. I show in the next section how these two discourses intersect in the relief camps to produce a nation with the working-class woman at its center. Here again I follow Pratt’s lead:
Individuals are also produced by multiple, sometimes contradictory discourses. Managing these contradictions and bringing one discourse in relation to another can open points of resistance.

I also partially draw from Miranda Joseph’s argument that ‘subjectification in and through discourse is crucial to the process of producing individuals as skilled and unskilled workers.’

In SEWA’s pursuit of producing its ideal community, a Gandhian nation, SEWA produces particular subjects that are simultaneously local and yet partake in the imagining of the nation. I start this discussion by drawing parallel with Gandhi’s relief efforts and SEWA’s relief efforts—as I see both as integral to the project of nation-building.

**Sewing the nation, spinning the wheel: Is it seva or is it work?**

The spinning wheel means national consciousness and a contribution by every individual to a definite constructive national work.

Gandhi

Gandhi’s writings reveal spinning as a way to connect the diverse peoples of India into one nation, and he saw disaster relief as an ideal opportunity to make those connections. He wrote, “The whole of the yarn that may be produced by the famine-stricken people would be used by the nation.” Gandhi saw the spinning wheel as a tool that could unite the nation economically by making it self-reliant, symbolically by associating the wearing of Khadi with the national body, and literally as the

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243 I write partially because while I agree with Joseph in her discussion of how volunteerism produces subjects for the community, I do not agree with her association of all community with capitalism.

244 CWMG: 26.

245 CWMG: 26.
threads of the looms in disparate parts of the nation clothe the bodies of the nation. Through his valorization of the spinning wheel he also valorized labor-intensive work, emphasizing that “self-reliance through labor would be required of all citizens of future India.” Gandhi’s image of an ideal Indian citizen would probably be a poor woman, sitting in her house and spinning (see figure 4.1). While Gandhi advocated spinning for both men and women, he also discussed how women were naturally suited to work on the charkha. In the discourse of a Gandhian nation women appear as productive citizens, central to the construction of the nation.

In SEWA’s description of the women in relief camps, the recipients of relief, we see an image of women sewing and working diligently at crafting the godhri. A godhri is a patchwork-quilt that Gujarati women stitch out of pieces of worn-out cloth—a sari, or old cotton bed sheets, children’s clothes, men’s shirts, and whatever else they can salvage from the house. The layers in it provide the cushion and warmth. At the time when the textile mills were functioning, the waste generated from them used to be a good material for godhris. Women would go into the waste yards of these mills and sort out pieces that they could use. They would then sew them into godhris and either use them at home or sell them in the open market.

The godhri represents the turning of waste into a product with use value by women. But the godhri also represents something else. In order to make a godhri, women need to sew many disparate pieces of fabric together. All of these separate pieces come together to make a whole godhri. I would like to use the metaphor of a godhri here to

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argue how SEWA’s relief work attempts to bring together sections of Indian society into its vision of the Gandhian nation. I also see parallels in SEWA’s emphasis on women’s work especially stitching, with Gandhi’s emphasis on the spinning wheel as mechanisms for disaster relief. In both cases the creation of a self-reliant community connected through production and consumption of labor-intensive\textsuperscript{247} locally produced goods is the aim. The stated aim is also to produce a community in which the work and worth of each of its members is valued, especially its women.

Relief camps provide a space in which primarily working-class populations from different areas of the city come together. This coming together provides an ideal opportunity to build community. Driven away from their homes and in need of any and all relief, the populations in relief camps prove to be willing subjects for SEWA’s pedagogical and social constructivist mission. SEWA’s discourse of a Gandhian nation in which “economic freedom” is attained by everyone guides their strategy in the relief camps and in the Shantipath Kendras. The Shantipath Kendras also work to bring together different religious communities physically in one place (unlike relief camps which are segregated on the basis of religion). SEWA’s nation is constructed by emphasizing the centrality of class and gender identity of SEWA women. In doing seva and claiming seva—the SEWA women are demanding for themselves a place as equal subjects of the nation. The women are also the agents who will spread the message (through face-to-face communication) to their families and communities.

\textsuperscript{247} The labor-intensive is important because only then can the 30 crores that Gandhi is talking about (and the 1.2 billion that constitute India now) be gainfully employed.
Seva in disaster relief emerges as a situated practice that connects the geographically and socially distant people together through notions of family and caring.

Moreover, like the waste cloth used in the godhri, populations in the relief camps are often viewed as the peripheral members of the community, those who are not needed. This is more pronounced in the case of the poor working-class women who are viewed as potential thieves or at the very least a nuisance. In presenting the women in the camps as productive members of the community SEWA establishes the working-class woman as integral to the national economy—one who is not a drain on the nation’s resources but a contributor to it.

The poor working-class woman, according to SEWA, is central to the nation’s progress. “It is her labor and enterprise which creates the wealth of the nation and whose hard work leads to national growth,” wrote Renana Jhabvala (coordinator and member SEWA executive committee) and Shalini Sinha (consultant SEWA) in the report entitled Liberalization and the Woman Worker. In this article, Jhabvala and Sinha also outline some of the potential disasters that liberalization can create for the working-class women. SEWA takes on the job of working out ways to provide relief to and rehabilitate the women workers affected by liberalization. Celebrating, wearing and consuming the products produced by working-class Indian women, is one way

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248 SEWA’s struggle for the street vendor’s right to public space illustrates this point. Or also in the case of Muslim women who are viewed as potential threats as they ‘reproduce’ the Muslim community.

through which SEWA women commit to this project. The other way, which I think, is more consistent with SEWA’s commitment to making the working-class women’s labor visible to the nation, is to highlight her worker identity, even as she remains a victim in a relief camp.

As we approached the women in the camps, they recognized us as their SEWA sisters. They immediately came forward and asked: Have you brought us work? We need work, not charity.

Mahimaben

SEWA distributed work to women in the relief camps almost as soon as they began the relief operation. Of course the first step was to complete a survey of the major

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250 The first few days I volunteered in SEWA I wore my jeans and a shirt to work. Jeans and shirt were the common attire for most college students in Urban Gujarat, especially Ahmedabad. Within a few days of my working at the SEWA office I switched to wearing cotton salwaar kameez. By the end of the month I was largely wearing Khadi, often produced by one of the SEWA cooperatives. No one had asked me to change my sense of dress, there had been no specific clothing comments directed at me and yet I felt there was an unspoken message in the office – everyone wore khadi. At the very least women in SEWA wore saris and salwar kameez made from fabric that was very visibly handcrafted in India.

Khadi, has been in the past, and is even now an expression of national identity. As a result of Gandhi’s call for *swadeshi* during the anti-colonial movement, people were encouraged to produce and consume homespun, hand-woven cloth (Khadi). The wearing of khadi was meant to (re)claim from the British the ‘Indian’ spiritual and economic space. At the same time it also had the effect of marking bodies as ‘Indian’ and thus creating a sense of (Indian) community. Politicians in India today wear khadi as a display of their Indianess, social activists wear khadi as a proof of their authenticity and commitment to grassroots and many young college students in Delhi and elsewhere wear a combination of khadi shirts with Jeans as an expression of their hybrid identities. Irrespective of the khadi politics women in India wear ‘Indian’ clothing more so then the men who have adapted the suit and the boot to be more a part of their vocabulary than the traditional dresses for men in India. The production and consumption of clothing and textiles is very much connected to expressions of gendered national identity, especially in postcolonial nation-states.

However, I think the wearing of khadi in SEWA goes much beyond being an expression of national identity. The wearing of khadi is also an expression of solidarity for the poor SEWA women who despite of all their hardships are working hard to spin, weave, dye, embroider and stitch khadi clothing. It is a political statement meant to recognize the hard work of poor working-class women as integral to national development.

251 This was a statement that I felt was almost committed to memory by all SEWA workers I met with. Every one of them asserted that the women they met at the camps wanted work not charity. SEWA’s annual report after the earthquake (2002) and its recent annual report (2004) both highlight a similar sentiment. Since I was unable to visit the relief camps I do not know the extent to which the disaster victims themselves expressed this sentiment. However, I think it is significant that SEWA workers consistently bring the ‘work not charity’ attitude of the women in the camps to the fore.
trade groups in the camp. However, even before economic activity was introduced in the camp, SEWA workers had organized the production of food and survival-related services in the camps. Discussing these SEWA workers emphasize, “Women at the camp were equally involved.”

A description of what the women in the camp were engaged in:

The older women in the camp used to cut the vegetables, the middle-aged women used to wash the utensils and the younger girls, they kneaded the dough. This was hard work and kneading the dough in such large quantities required a lot of physical strength. It is a big task to feed 10,000 people, but the women in the camp, they were hard working. And yes the chappatis there were four five chullas (stoves) and a group of women were constantly making them.

Mahimaben

I asked Mahimaben: What were the men doing?

Mahimaben: They worked too. There was tea to be made and served several times a day. They always did it on time. Then the food had to be distributed.

As our conversation progressed, however, the emphasis was always on the women as the worker, and the men, well, “they joined in too.” Mahimaben and other SEWA workers wanted me to understand that the women in the camps were not mere helpless victims; neither were they sitting in the camps enjoying the government or NGO-provided welfare and food. SEWA relief workers insisted that the women were in the camp as active participants in the running of the camp. These women, whom we might think of as helpless victims, worked hard to feed the more than 10,000 camp residents. They labored to keep the camp clean and with the help of SEWA’s involvement to produce economic value.

Mahimaben: The women worked on the sewing machines in two shifts. For each set of salwar kameez that they stiched they earned Rs. 12. Some of them were involved in cutting the pieces others in sewing them. Some women could sew three salwar kameezs in their shift. This was a total of Rs. 36 in a day. These women were not beggars
I asked her: Who bought these salwar kameezs?

Mahimaben: The traders. SEWA has contact with the local traders and we convinced them to buy products from the camp women. But the women, they are also very enterprising. They had started to sell the salwar kameezs in the camp itself. Many of them had fled from their homes without any extra clothing. So they bought from each other.

Mahimaben herself is a tailoress. Although she is now engaged primarily in a senior paid position in SEWA she claims not to have given up her work as a tailoress. She still goes home in the evening and stitches as and when time permits. She claims that for a poor woman her work is the only route to her empowerment and therefore her (Mahimaben) work, which has contributed to her (Mahimaben) position, is sacred. She described to me in great detail how the women in the camps needed to work, not only to get their economic situation back on track, but because “work is their life.” Moreover, many SEWA women told me that it was important to involve the residents at the camp in work, or “their minds will wander, and they will start to think of the violence.”

A major emphasis of SEWA’s relief work in any disaster scenario is always to get the women back to her (paid) work. In the case of the post-earthquake relief SEWA’s Jeevika (livelihood) project is aimed at constructing ‘productive’ women citizens. In the case of the post-Godhra relief camps, SEWA distributed work based on the particular trade groups and skills available at the camps. Bapunagar and Bakarshah Roja were the two large camps where sewing salwar kameezs and godhris (patchwork quilts) was the main work. At other camps Agarbatti (incense stick) rolling, bidi
(hand-rolled cigarettes) rolling, paper bags and Rakhi (ritual thread) making kept the women busy. Mahimaben elaborated:

The paper bag became one of the most popular activities. There were old magazines and newspapers that we got for them and some glue. That was all that was needed. Everyone enjoyed this work. Kids and men joined in too.

The godhris were the most easy to sell. Everyone in the camp needed one. The Red Cross bought many to use in other camps. Many NGOs in the city bought them for use in their child-care centers. They were also easy to sell in the open market. The women stitched up to 3 a day and earned Rs. 36.

While relief camps are usually seen as spaces of despair, SEWA’s description of them reveals them to be economically active productive spaces (see figure 4.2). Such a depiction does not appear very different from that of a factory, lined up with industrious women working away in shifts on sewing machines. According to SEWA narratives every time SEWA relief workers go into the field to seek out their affected sisters they meet women who ask, “behn have you brought us work?” All of the images that the SEWA academy shared with me illustrating their relief operations showed women on sewing machines stitching salwar kameez or Godris, or women, men and children deeply immersed in making paper bags. Irrespective of disaster relief, every image of a SEWA woman is an image in which she is shown to be engaged in an economic pursuit, either producing a commodity such as incense sticks, or selling farm produce on the streets or providing a service such as child-care (see figure 4.3). This representation of women as constructive citizens contributing to the national economy stands in contrast to the commonly understood notion of the
women as citizens because they ‘reproduce’ the nation. It is also important to point out that SEWA’s emphatic articulation of the woman as worker makes only the economic identity of the women visible, while at the same time, pushing her domestic identity into purdah.

While on the one hand, SEWA relief workers are presenting an image of the working-class woman appears as essential to the nation, they are also creating an image of a nation in which all members (including women) are productive citizens. In the milieu of post-liberalization India this image can have interesting consequences. The Gandhian and SEWA vision is to create a self-reliant nation in which production and consumption of swadeshi goods tie the country together. However, in today’s context the image that SEWA constructs also has other connotations. It brings to mind the figure of the ‘third-world’ woman ideally suited to, and diligently working in, multinational factories to produce commodities for the global market. As all first world corporations are looking at the third world for their vast resource of cheap labor and as the Gujarat and the national governments are ‘opening doors’ to attract such ‘investments,’’ what are we to make of a relief project that highlights the work ethic of populations in relief camps? Is SEWA inadvertently playing into the role of providing cheap labor for the global economy? Or is it a conscious effort to make the third-world woman visible, so that she may ‘benefit’ from globalization? What then is the

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252 Numerous scholars have pointed out the mutual constitution of the constructs of gender and of the nation. For a review of this literature see Sinha 2003. Specific to women’s role as (re) producers of the nation see Yuval-Davis. 1996. “Women and the Biological Reproduction of ‘the Nation’” in Women Studies International Forum 19: 1/2. (17-24).

253 SEWA’s policy is to not intervene directly in the domestic matters of the women.
real meaning of SEWA’s “economic freedom” for the nation? What is SEWA’s nation?

I don’t think there are any easy answers to these questions. Moreover, the story becomes further complicated as we remind ourselves as to how the SEWA relief workers are describing their own work in the camps. The SEWA workers articulate their relief work as seva. The name SEWA itself connotes selfless service. A contradiction then emerges wherein SEWA, on the one hand attempts to highlight the economic activity of self-employed women and the importance of paid work to the poor woman’s life and her contributions to the national economy; on the other hand, they also idealize and celebrate the unpaid work of those poor women who are providing relief. The women with whom I spoke to about their relief work asserted quite strongly that what they were doing is seva:

We enjoy doing it. It is not like we are told to do this work. We are not told that we will get a salary for doing this. It is not for money. This is our seva. I even told my father to keep his shop closed. I told him, “How can you think of business, when so many people have died.” I even sent my brother to the hospital to do seva and he served people free tea.

Rohiniben

The ‘natural’ and human-made disasters evoked strong sentiments in these women and they wanted to put in their effort, their seva for those affected, even when this seva was at considerable risk and hardship to them and their families:

We never thought about our own food or rest. If we got the time to eat we ate the food we brought from our homes. We never thought about our own comfort. At times we even forgot to drink a sip of water. We were just thinking about how better we could do seva.
Mahimaben

My family was scared when I went to Kutch for earthquake relief. Even my children tried to stop me by saying, “don’t go, an earthquake can happen again anytime.” But I persuaded them. I told them, “I am doing seva, nothing will happen to me.”

Jashodhaben

We were not afraid to go out even in curfew. Sometime the police would stop us and we would tell him to let us go because we were only doing seva.

Reemaben

Why is it that, on the one hand, poor women’s economic activity is hailed as central to the nation, while at the same time the SEWA relief workers idealize their own selfless service as unpaid on-the-ground workers? Although it might appear that the use of the socio-spatial practice of seva to describe their relief work is a strategy to escaping and negotiating the control on their spatial mobility by their families and the state (police), I think there is more complexity to be unraveled here.

I want to suggest that the obligation or the desire to do seva, that women in SEWA claim is natural, is not really so natural. Very often in conversations with SEWA women (and with women outside SEWA), I have been told that it is inherent in women to do seva, that this somehow is supposed to come naturally to us as women, and is therefore not to be spoken or claimed. Ascribing such naturalness to women’s seva actually serves to conceal the power structures that hold women and men in different ways, as national, familial and global subjects. Within families, a son’s seva for his parents is hailed as his prime duty. However, often within the inside spaces of homes, women are responsible for serving the members of the family with love,
affection and a self-sacrificing nature never stopping to think about their own needs. As members of a nation, a man’s desh seva is claimed as heroic seva, whereas women are required to silently keep doing what comes naturally to them. In spite of the fact that even women’s seva involves a lot of laborious and continuous work, this is not really regarded as work, but as a way women relate to others, an expression of their love and support for their families, organizations, community and nation.

SEWA is a huge organization—SEWA is also a huge ideological apparatus. As the SEWA members sit around in a circle to make a decision, the ideology of SEWA (working-class solidarity, Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhian nation and sisterhood) dominates the discussion and the decision. SEWA is a collective. There is little space for individualism.

I do not want to say that the women in SEWA are being forced to work in the relief camps against their will. I think they are ‘doing seva’ out of their desire to serve. What I want to point attention to is the question of how such a desire is constructed in the first place. Feminist scholars have articulated how gender is constructed through the very performances that serve to define it.254 Through processes of socialization in families, schools, media and folklore a certain conception of a gender emerges which naturalizes women’s caring roles as integral to their identities and existence.255

While seva as a performance that constructs identity, might produce SEWA women as gendered subjects, it does not however take away their agency to subvert the gender and spatial norms of this performance. Seva produces subjects but it is not an all-enveloping structure that inhibits agency. SEWA women make the deliberate gesture of claiming their work in relief camps as precisely that ‘heroic’ seva that is hailed as supreme. This is the heroic seva of the military, and of Shravan Kumar who died serving his parents—that SEWA women seek to claim. By articulating a discourse of women as natural, selfless seva providers, and by engaging in public seva, very visibly and very vocally, SEWA women are subverting the gender equation of the discourse of seva. Moreover, SEWA women use the rhetoric of seva to gain a moral ground from which to construct their Gandhian nation. And here it is not Gandhi proclaiming the women as central to the nation, but the women themselves who claim agency in their own construction of themselves and of the nation.

In addition, I believe that there is a strategic deployment of geographic scales at work here, one that is conscious of the other local, national and international actors at work in the ‘social service sector.’ With seva becoming part of an increasingly professionalized sector, the field has become crowded with NGOs and service organizations. In the years after pro-liberalization reforms these service NGOs have really mushroomed at an amazingly fast rate. Moreover, each of these NGOs comes with a vision of its Indian nation—many also with a vision of a Hindu nation.

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256 While in 1988 there were 12,000 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs, there are now more than 2 million. See Kamat. 2002.
In this crowded and complex scenario it is important for SEWA to assert its local position. In very clearly articulating a discourse of their relief work as seva, as unpaid, as voluntary, and as natural, SEWA relief workers position themselves in contrast to the paid, nine-to-five NGO workers for whom the relief work might be ‘just a job.’ The spatial practice of seva enables SEWA to position itself as an authentic locally rooted organization that has been serving the nation for a long time (as opposed to the ones that spring up and dissolve in opportunistic ways). SEWA is swadeshi. It is not some foreign or foreign funded NGO that is taking over the national space. SEWA’s articulated position then becomes that of the rooted local, the one that ‘really cares,’ and the one that will ‘stick with you.’ In Gandhi’s words:

The difference between a voluntary worker and a hireling lies in the fact that whereas a hireling gives his service to whosoever pays the price, a national voluntary worker gives service only to the nation for the cause that he believes in and he serves it even though he might have to starve. (Young India, 5-16-1929)

SEWA echoes a similar sentiment when they position themselves as unpaid on-the-ground workers as opposed to the disconnected salaried government employees or the foreign disaster ‘visitor.’ SEWA’s nation is to be constructed vis-à-vis consistent on-the-ground work; it is a nation or even a global community that is to be built from the bottom-up.

This strategic defining of the local as its scale of praxis, allows SEWA to be a powerful actor at both the national and the global scales. SEWA is seen as the local and national representative in international and multinational arenas, where it pushes

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257 Here the word swadeshi is used not so much in the Gandhian sense, but in response to Hindu Nationalist notions of national/foreign – seen most prominently in their Swadeshi Jagran Manch.
for change. SEWA has able to push policies through at the ILO, Women’s World Banking, Rockefeller foundation, and the UNDP, precisely by using the label of the local.

The strategic defining of itself as the local, as springing from the grassroots, also allows SEWA to become a legitimate voice in the politics of nation building.

SEWA’s relief workers describe work as work towards national ‘development.’ This work is done as ‘seva’ for the nation. By articulating their relief work as seva, SEWA claims a space for working-class poor women within a nation that had previously denied them inclusion.258

Geographers have developed a rich body of literature that attempts to understand the politics of scale construction, particularly in the context of globalization. The structural transformations that are taking place at the level of the state, in international organizations and in the response of political non-state actors are of particular interest to geographers studying scale as a social construct. Here I have attempted to show how the liberalization of the Indian economy has resulted in a shift in the domain of public service and welfare—resulting in an immense increase in non-state actors at the ground-level. I illustrated how SEWA women engage in the politics of scale construction as they deal with these shifts. I find particularly useful Kevin Cox’s

258 Here I am referring to the marginalization of poor working-class, especially informal-sector women within the national political economy. Although they are legally citizens of the Indian nation-state, they are often perceived as a drain on national resources and at best a nuisance, if not criminals. This is well documented in numerous SEWA reports and documents and in their history of struggle for changed policies, laws, and attitudes.


discussion of scale in relation to understanding the nature of local politics. Cox writes:

Spaces of dependence are defined by those more-or-less localized social relations upon which we depend for the realization of essential interests and for which there is no substitute elsewhere: they define place-specific conditions for our material well being and our sense of significance. These spaces are interested in broader sets of relationships of more global character and these constantly threaten to undermine them….In so doing they construct a different form of space which I call here a space of engagement: the space in which the politics of securing a space of dependence unfolds.

Cox\textsuperscript{259}

Using several case studies Cox shows how local actors, recognizing the tension between the spaces of dependence and those of engagement construct ‘networks of association’ with actors at other levels of abstraction and reality. SEWA’s scalar politics is a simultaneous production of these spaces of dependence through its grassroots action, and the construction of spaces of engagement with the national and global scales through its deliberate framing of their work as national development and global solidarity. SEWA occupies a complicated field with numerous local, regional, national and global actors and discourses. Its scalar politics are responsive to this field of relief in post-liberalization Gujarat, India. In the next section, I elaborate some more on the politics of the discourse of scale in SEWA’s relief work.

**SEWA and earthquake relief**

Consistent with SEWA’s emphasis on work, the project of earthquake relief focused on ‘livelihood restoration.’ However, the earthquake relief differed from riot relief in that it was performed at a geographically distant location. Women from Ahmedabad

\textsuperscript{259} Cox, Kevin. 1998. “Spaces of dependence, spaces of engagement and the politics of scale, or looking for local politics” in Political Geography 17:1. (2).
left their families and traveled into the devastated areas of rural Kutch to perform their seva. Reemaben’s account of earthquake relief highlights the negotiations involved in performing relief in a distant location:

The day the earthquake happened the SEWA office was closed. You know it was 26th January. I tried calling the office but we could only meet the next day. However two of our members had already left for Kutch. We talked to them on the phone and they told us of all the devastation that has occurred in Kutch. “You will need to come here,” they told us. I left for Kutch the very next day—it was the third day after the earthquake. I worked in Kutch for more than a month. There was no electricity, water was hard to find, no real food but we had to somehow manage. Sometimes we would make tea with a spoonful of milk powder, eat some Parle G biscuits and sleep at 2 in the night. There was no question of taking a bath. We slept in the tents or in SEWA karkhana. Working in the field was hard, but when you are away from home and committed to the work you become a hard worker. If you stay with us for a month, and work in these situations, you will also become like us.

I asked Reemaben if she had problems with her family because of being away for such a long time.

Reemaben replied: They were very worried. But I used to return home every week to tell them that all was well. I would also tell them about all the seva that I was doing. I told my mother, this is seva, nothing will happen to me. There were other women also working alongside. This made her a little comfortable.

However, performing relief in Kutch was not easy. First, people in Kutch do not speak Gujarati, which is the commonly spoken language in Ahmedabad. Then the earthquake had destroyed all the roads, so that relief workers often had to walk miles to reach distant villages. Reemaben felt that she could play a critical role in relief work because she could communicate directly with the Kutchi community. Besides
she felt that since she was young she was able to bear the hardships that accompanied disaster relief after the earthquake.

“So you can speak Kutchi?” I asked her. “No, but I know Kathiawari, it is very similar,” Reemaben replied.

Even though SEWA has a large membership in the Kutch region, this was not the home base for the SEWA workers involved in relief work. A different language, a different dress code, a different work ethic (this was a largely rural community as opposed to the urban SEWA members performing relief) to some extent made the SEWA relief workers feel out of place. They could no longer claim the position of the local. Yet, they did.

Geographers have pointed out how local, national, regional and global are terms that do not in reality have a fixed boundary— they are relational and socially constructed ways of making sense of reality.260 Local in relation to what? Global in relation to what? Comparing themselves to the other organizations involved in earthquake relief in Kutch SEWA workers again claimed the position of the local. So what if they did not speak Kutchi, at least some of them spoke Kathiawari—that was similar. Or at least they were all Gujarati. Moreover, many of the SEWA workers had previously visited Kutch to conduct surveys and training programs. They had met many of the

260 Herod and Wright (Eds.). 2002.
women they were now helping. The Kutchi women might dress very differently\textsuperscript{261} but they were after all their SEWA sisters.

Over the course of the month, SEWA workers established strong relationships and bonds with those whom they served. Many had learned how to communicate in Kutchi, while others had initiated Gujarati classes in rural schools. Reemaben, who in Ahmedabad works for the SEWA literacy programs, conducted basic literacy classes for women who had become new SEWA members. She stated:

When we were leaving, there were tears in those women’s eyes. They said, “Behn, are we not going to see you again. So I asked them to give me their addresses and later I visited them many times. I have now taken a pledge to travel as often as possible and to start classes for them again. This will be my seva for our nation.

SEWA workers claim the position of the local –sometimes on the basis of their organization’s spread, sometimes on the basis of a Gujarati identity, and often because they “all belong to the same nation.” SEWA women compare themselves with other organizations that were engaged in the relief process:

In Bhuj there were so many teams from outside—from your America also. But we were there first of all. This was our neighborhood. We had to help.

Reemaben

The outside organization and their relief supplies used to arrive by air cargo. These had to be unloaded and loaded into trucks, transported and then distributed in

\textsuperscript{261} Rural Kutch shares a border with Pakistan and a large proportion of the population is Muslim. The Muslim women in Kutch wear dark colored clothing. The common colors are maroon, dark blue, brown and black. Hindu women in Kutch can be identified by their bright pink, orange, red or yellow clothing. All Hindu and Muslim women in Kutch wear a long pleated skirt with lots of ghera and embroidered shirts. They take a long scarf over their shirts. Urban SEWA women are more diverse in their clothing ranging from salwaar kammez, to saari to lehnga’s (long skirt).
villages. One plane load means four truck loads of stuff and all this had to be done in half an hour. There was a lot of work to be done. When you are from outside you get an aerial view from the plane, they took many pictures from up there to show the devastation. We worked at the ground level. There was so much work to be done, no time to take pictures.

Jashodaben

Loading of the trucks used to start at 5.00 am, they would depart at 7.00 am. We did not have much of our own to distribute but we knew the communities, we knew where the really needy people were, so the collector provided us with the things and we distributed them. Off course we had to keep detailed accounts of the distribution and report them back.

Madedenaben

SEWA also claims the position of the local based on their method of working. Even though the primary relief workers were from SEWA’s urban union at Ahmedabad, SEWA’s immediate strategy was to mobilize and involve Kutchi SEWA leaders in the process. SEWA workers claim that it is only through these ‘insiders’ that they gained information about the ‘real needs’ of those affected in the earthquake. Such an approach, they claim, helped them to evolve a long-term strategy for relief in the region in contrast to the outside NGOs “who come and go.”

Reemaben

You know (aap ko to pata hai), the earthquake happened on a day of national importance. There was lot of emotion (josh) in the people, everyone in the country wanted to come to Kutch to help. Many people came. It is not that they did not help. Many doctors dedicated their time here. That was an immediate need. But disasters have long-term effects. That is why SEWA is there.

Reemaben

SEWA’s livelihood restoration policy emphasizes continued relief as opposed to a one-time charity. Even after the initial one month of distributing food supplies, providing health and child care, and of helping widowed women fill out required paperwork for compensation; SEWA decided to stay involved in the region’s
rehabilitation. SEWA undertook a collaborative project with a United Nations organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Program (WFP), the Government of India and the Government of Gujarat. The aim of the project was to provide sustainable employment to women in 400 villages in three rural districts (Kutch, Patan and Surendranagar) of Gujarat. The IFAD provided the funds as a loan to the Government of India who channeled the funds to SEWA through the Government of Gujarat. The WFP provided the food while SEWA became the on the ground worker, with sole responsibility for the implementation of the project.

Kutch, Patan and Surendranagar are largely agricultural areas. Most of the women and men are engaged in growing sesame, salt farming, gum collection or in pastoral work. SEWA survey teams identified the economic options in the region, including those above, and added to the list craft production. All women in rural Gujarat are engaged in some sort of embroidery or fabric dying and block printing. For the most part such production is for their own use, for their daughter’s dowry or at times for close members of the family who have an impending wedding. The craft here has traditionally been understood as a woman’s ‘natural’ skill that all women grow into. The embroidered product is not meant to be a commodity and is traditionally passed down from mother to daughter, stored in large, very ornate boxes in their homes. SEWA relief workers claim that they ‘identified’ a source of economic security for

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262 Since my emphasis was more on relief in the city of Ahmedabad I will not elaborate here on the specific details of the on the ground work in Kutch. However, I continue to highlight those aspects of relief that I observed on my visit to Kutch (even though they are not directly related to SEWA as by then I had not identified any particular organization to study).
these women, and introduced the production of craft as a commodity in these villages. SEWA designers work with the rural members to produce marketable designs and objects and SEWA outlets like Banascraft and Kutchcraft sell these products nationally and globally.\(^{263}\)

I visited Kutch as part of my preliminary research for this project on disaster relief. My visit, less than a year after the earthquake, involved traveling to remote villages in the region and attempting to gain an understanding of the dynamics of the relief process. Villages in Kutch are highly scattered and very sparse, often consisting of just 10-15 Bhungis (circular mud houses with a thatch roof). Sure enough, my arrival in a taxi into these communities always created quite a commotion. Women would lead me into their homes and want to ask me lots of questions. The questions always began with, “Do you want mineral water?” Then they would open their storage boxes and start taking out exquisite pieces of heavily embroidered shawls and bedcovers and skirts and shirts. I would spend hours admiring them and answering their questions. However, as soon as I would indicate that I had to leave, the question arose, “would you like to buy any of these shawls, they would look very good on you.” The women indicated that a lot of Americans (meaning all white-skinned foreigners) came to Kutch for earthquake relief and bought the shawls. “These are probably a fashion now in America,” the women joked.

\(^{263}\) SEWA’s craft products can be purchased from the website of the SEWA trade facilitation Center accessed through www.sewatfc.org/products.htm
Disaster relief, whether with or without a strong economic emphasis as in SEWA’s work, has surely altered the economic culture of the region. Women’s traditional ‘natural’ skills have acquired an economic significance. Mineral water bottles are the norm and national TV has gained importance.\textsuperscript{264} It is easy to argue that disaster relief has resulted in the integration of these remote villages not just into the global capitalist economy but also into the Indian nation. A new national consciousness\textsuperscript{265} has emerged in the villages as a result of the continued presence of relief workers and their pedagogical endeavors. Drawing from these observations, I see the process of disaster relief as fundamental to the construction of the nation. Nations are not merely constructed out of disembodied newspaper circulations; they also need the (however occasional) face-to-face contact between members of the ‘imagined community.’

Needless to say, such mundane tasks as maintaining the national solidarity by making on-the-ground contacts, often rests on NGOs largely constituted by hardly-paid women, performing seva.

\textsuperscript{264} Especially after many of these villages were showcased on national channels as successful rehabilitation efforts. Prime Minister Vajpayee came to inaugurate one of the villages rebuilt after the disaster.

\textsuperscript{265} While I use the term national consciousness I also want to highlight the multiplicity of what such a consciousness could mean. While SEWA’s relief efforts emphasized a secular nation and its economically productive ‘women’ citizens other relief efforts constructed a Hindu vision of the nation. The earthquake relief project has come under immense scrutiny owning to the involvement of Hindu Nationalist NGOs rebuilding villages in their image of a ‘Hindu nation’ often times discriminating against the Muslims.
Summary

In this chapter, I showed how SEWA is situated at the center of multiple power relations that construct gender and the nation in multiple ways. On the one hand, we read SEWA workers as subjects within a gendered discourse of women’s naturalized seva, while on the other hand we see SEWA as an agent in actively constructing the discourse of working-class women as integral to the nation. While SEWA workers negotiate the spatial boundaries of the home, community, and the nation, they simultaneously construct the connections between the local, national, and the global. I showed how through articulating their on-the-ground seva as simultaneously local, national and global SEWA is creating what Cox has defined as ‘spaces of dependence’ and ‘spaces of engagement.’ This scalar politics of SEWA is in response to the increasing number of ‘professionalized’ seva providers that have flooded the field of relief work in post-liberalization India.

I also attempted to present the distinction between doing seva in the relief camps and doing seva at a geographically distant location. I discussed how seva as a socio-spatial practice constructs gendered subjects located in particular webs of power, either as performers of seva or as its recipients. Moreover, the coming together in a particular place of both the performer of seva and the recipient of seva contributes to the building of community. Often such on-the-ground, face-to-face, relational tasks are performed by hardly-paid women doing seva, but not claiming seva. SEWA workers by claiming their work in camps as ‘seva for the nation’ are making visible their agency in the construction of a national community.
Figure 4.1: The nation being spun by the spinning wheel. The women on the right is shown with a national flag in hand, that has the spinning wheel—In a Gandhian nation she is integral to the construction of the nation through spinning.

Figure 4.2: ‘Livlihood restoration’ at the camps
Source: Prathiv Shah. 2004 (B/W), SEWA (colored)
Figure 4.3: SEWA women at work. All the images that my SEWA respondents shared with me showed SEWA women as active economic participants.

Source: www.SEWA.org
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

“India Shinning”: these buzzwords were ubiquitous in conversations across India towards the end of 2003 and in early 2004 (see Appendix C). In just a month the Indian television and other media had broadcast more than 10,000 advertisements commissioned by the then ruling Bhartiya Janata Party to proclaim, “There is no better time to be an Indian.” This pre-poll campaign led to an explosion of debates, discussions and seminars on “Is India really shining?” or “Which India is shining?” Particularly intriguing were posters that included a Kashmiri Muslim man smiling with a bunch of lilies in his hand, a woman in a yellow sari playing cricket, and rural poor in their ethnic-looking clothes working on the computer. The religious violence of 2002 was assumed to be forgotten and the boundaries of caste, class, and gender were rendered invisible by presenting a coherent image of an “Indian” and his/her “feel good times.” The multiplicity of narratives that conflict and work with each other to produce the “Indian” nation were all frozen to present a fixed image of the state’s singular nationalism. The political party in power imagined a nation and served it to the people complete with dreams of economic progress and technology, and more importantly a “sense of national pride” in the name of an “emerging super power.” While such imaginings might have fared well with the Hindu middle-class, the poor and the minorities felt left out and the BJP ended up losing the elections. In other words, the official nationalism circulated large scale through media outlets (including print media) did not match with the multiplicity of local national imaginations and lost out.
My reference to Anderson’s conception of the spread of nationalism should be obvious, as should the limits of such a conception. Nationalism does not just spread through often-incomprehensible print media, a once every ten year census, or museums in metropolitan areas far removed from the majority of populations—even though these may be important mediums. In this dissertation, I have attempted to supplement Anderson’s discussion on nationalism by emphasizing the importance of situated material practices, such as seva, in producing and sustaining the nation. On-the-ground seva, which often results in face-to-face contact between the members of the “imagined community,” results in producing particular identities that are simultaneously local, national, and sometimes even global. I suggested that the limited attention to the face-to-face interactions in theoretical discussions of nationalism has to do with two discourses—one geographic and the other related to gender roles. First, the discourse of the local as primarily a subordinate site where the supposedly more powerful scales of national and global act and produce, contributes towards making invisible the productive aspects of locality. Second, women’s interactions within a majority of the academic discourse of nationalism are viewed as having less to do with the production of the nation and more to do with the reproduction of an already imagined nation. This leads to women’s seva for the nation being viewed as mere social reproduction having little contribution to the production of the discourse of the nation. I showed how women’s on-the-ground seva in sites of disaster relief facilitate not only the ideological reproduction of nations, but that the performance of seva is accompanied by women’s challenging and altering existing discourses on gender and nationalism.
Following on Gibson-Graham’s call to look beyond our own discourse on capitalism, I want us to look beyond our own conceptualizations of nationalism. I propose that we look beyond and outside the liberal discourse of nationalism. One such opportunity is afforded to us by SEWA’s discourse of the nation which draws from Gandhian philosophy—what I call SEWA’s Gandhian nation.

SEWA’s discourse of the Gandhian nation also calls for a decentralized nation where power is distributed in small self-reliant but mutually dependent units: it is a village swaraj. In this Gandhian nation, power is not concentrated in the state, but within each individual. In many ways then, the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s has opened up an opportunity for this alternate vision of the nation to be materialized. With the retreat of the state, the proliferation of autonomous NGOs, and the influx of potentially democratic technologies like the Internet—it seems that there is no better time to move towards a Gandhian nation—a nation that is not an inherently masculine domain, a nation that draws its power from locality, and a nation that is not exclusionary but neighborly.

If we are to understand discourses as described by geographer Geraldine Pratt—sociospatial circuits that are situated in place(s)—we will be able to move towards a better understanding of the power in locality. Discourses draw their meaning from situated places. In that sense, the local emerges as an extremely powerful and productive scale. The local, national, and global exist in a dynamic relationship as social constructs that materialize in particular places in particular ways. Moreover,
discourses such as seva, materialize in and produce particular identities in particular places. In this dissertation, I focused on the materialization of the discourse of seva, in the physical space of relief camps, in the context of an economically liberalizing, and a predominantly Hindu nationalist Gujarat. The discourse of seva not only draws its meaning from being located in relief camps, but also as with SEWA, produces national and gendered identities of both those who perform seva, and those who receive it. I showed how the discourse of seva as voluntary and as selfless, serves to make invisible the actual labor involved in the performance of seva. Seva is hard work. Moreover, this study revealed the paradox between SEWA worker’s descriptions of their relief work as seva idealizing their own unpaid labor, while emphasizing that the work of poor women is economically contributing to national development. I have attempted to make sense of this paradox in the dissertation—here I think it is important to point out that in both descriptions the labor of working-class women appears as productive of the nation. In the case of SEWA’s seva, I see their seva as feminist and nationalist—the nation here being the non-exclusionary idea of their Gandhian nation.

However, seva is a powerful discourse and is not always harnessed towards a feminist or non-exclusionary goal. In the introduction, I mentioned that seva has a geographical connotation, such that it is usually from inside—seva is performed for one’s family, one’s community, and one’s own nation—in whichever way one might conceptualize these (family, community, nation). In this dissertation, I focused on the seva of a Gandhian and feminist organization. However, during fieldwork, I also
studied the seva of a Hindu nationalist women’s organization in Gujarat. A comparison of the seva of SEWA and the seva of the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti reveals many similarities and many differences. For example, for SEWA women, the seva is integral to their understanding of themselves as agents within the nation. These are working-class women who see themselves not as marginal or peripheral but central to national development. For Samiti women, from Hindu nationalist middle-class families, seva is something they do in their spare time. Both SEWA and Samiti women feel empowered through their seva, but they feel empowered in different ways. SEWA’s agency, even as it draws from Gandhian philosophies remains autonomous, while the Samiti’s agency can be seen as supplementary within the hierarchical Hindu nationalist organizational structure. The study of seva as constitutive of gender and national identities needs to pay attention to these similarities and differences. In my future research I plan to analyze the discourse of seva in its multiple socio-spatial contexts.

A limitation of this study of seva is the privileging of the category of gender over others such as class, caste, and age which are equally constituted through and constitutive of seva. While using gender as an analytical category in this study has provided some understanding of the different assignments for men and women in their homes, communities and nation; it has restricted an understanding of seva as a polyvalent, complex, and historically contingent discourse. I have to a limited extent gestured to such an understanding of seva in this dissertation and propose to develop it further in my future research.
Ethnographies are about “thick descriptions” and writing ethnography is like reconstructing a place in text. But how does one present a coherent picture of a place, when as geographers we know that places themselves are complex amalgamations of contradictory and overlapping processes? Ethnographies by their very nature employ eclectic methodologies, theories, and stories—they are not neat and tidy. This dissertation is an ethnography of a place (relief camps) and a process (relief as seva) where multiple discourses of seva, nation, gender, welfare, international aid, religion, Gandhi, past, present, and future, intersect and overlap. As a geographer, I have attempted to make sense of how these multiple discourses materialize in place and how women from SEWA employ, negotiate, resist, challenge, reproduce, and produce many of these discourses. This is a story of SEWA women, their vision for the future of India, their discourse of Gandhi’s centrality to this vision, and their spatial politics of describing their local, national, regional and global seva. This is also my reading (or rather writing) of their story—my understanding of some of their actions in the context of conflicting national imaginations in Gujarat, mine and their experiences of how the discourse of seva intersected with our lives, mine and their experiences of how stories and theories intersect, overlap, and run parallel to each other—to form particular places in particular ways. It is my critique of the discourse of gender, nationalism and seva read through the lenses of SEWA’s on-the-ground practice of disaster relief in Gujarat, India.
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www.sewa.org

Sabrang Communications

Gita Society
www.gita-society.com/publications/silverbook-bookletsize.doc

South Asia Citizens Web
www.stopfundinghate.org/sacw/index.html

Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing
www.weigo.org
Appendix A:
SEWA’s documentation of its involvement in relief work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.N.</th>
<th>Name of the Camp SEWA where was working</th>
<th>No. of affected members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Aman Chowk</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Anand Flats</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Bombay Housing</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Bakarsha Na Roja</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Daniilmanda</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Camps</td>
<td>16700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Members of SEWA in Camps</td>
<td>21900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affected Members residing outside the camp</td>
<td>17000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total affected members</td>
<td>38900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employment organized up by SEWA in the five relief camps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Camp’s Name</th>
<th>Employment / Work per day</th>
<th>Total Income / day (Rs.)</th>
<th>Total Income in 3 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type of Work</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Daniilmanda</td>
<td>Mattress making</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paper Bags</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Anand Flats</td>
<td>Bidi Making</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mattress making</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Aman Chowk</td>
<td>Agarbetti rolling</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>5500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paper Bags</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mattress making</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stitching work (Dress)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paper Files – Folders</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Bombay Housing</td>
<td>Mattress making</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Bakarsha Na Roja</td>
<td>Paper Bags</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mattress making</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stitching work (Dress)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stitching work (Frocks)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stitching work (Cloth bags)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paper Files – Folders</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total Women</td>
<td>805 women</td>
<td>21,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The income figures are based on averages for each activity.
Appendix B:
SEWA’s documentation of loss to informal-sector workers as a result of the religious violence in early 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particulars</th>
<th>Daily earnings wages in Rs.</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Percentage of workers affected</th>
<th>Economic loss crores (Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manufacturing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homebased</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2,57,000</td>
<td>80 %</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>62,000</td>
<td>60 %</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trade and Hotels</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street vendors</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>1,27,000</td>
<td>60 %</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other trade Hotels</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1,31,000</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Construction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1,40,000</td>
<td>80 %</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transport</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autorickshaw, Pushcarts, Handcarts</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1,12,000</td>
<td>70 %</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Services</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning, unloading, housekeeping</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2,01,000</td>
<td>90 %</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,31,987</td>
<td></td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C:
India Shinning Advertisements

Vita

Anu Sabhlok grew up in India where she went to college at the School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi (1990-1995). Her childhood was spent in many different parts of the country as she moved along with her parents whose transferable jobs took them to a new place every two years. A love for understanding, reading, and constructing place inspired Anu to work for K.T. Ravindaran on architectural projects. After a little more than a year, she moved to Chandigarh, a new city at the foothills of the Himalayas to work for Jaspreet Thakar on architectural research related to urban development. In 1999, Anu moved to the United States to work on a master’s degree in Architecture at Penn State. Her master’s thesis focused on memory and urban form in the modernist city of Chandigarh. In 2001, she enrolled in the doctoral program in the department of Geography at Penn State. After taking a few classes in the women’s studies department at Penn State she decided to pursue the dual degree option with geography and women’s studies. Her interests in feminist and postcolonial geographies were inspired and sustained by the infectious enthusiasm and support of her advisor Melissa Wright and committee members Lorraine Dowler, Mrinalini Sinha and James McCarthy. While enrolled in the doctoral program she received the Society of Women Geographers national fellowship, an AAG dissertation research grant, and a graduate student summer residency at the Institute of Arts and Humanistic Studies at Penn State. She finished writing her dissertation while starting an academic career at the University of Lousivlle, Kentucky.