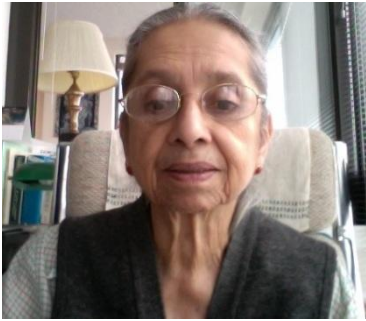


## *A College Professor Remembers*



**Geeta Somjee**

Geeta Somjee received her M.A. (Hons.) from Madras University, and Ph.D. from M. S. University of Baroda. She was a Visiting Fellow at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford for a number of years, the Wellesley College Centre for Research on Women, (U.S.A), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore and Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Simon Fraser University, in Vancouver. She has done longitudinal field research in rural and urban India, and was engaged in comparative study of the involvement of women in expanding health services in Asian societies. Her published works include *Narrowing the Gender Gap*, *Reaching Out to the Poor* (with A.H. Somjee) and "Social Change in the Nursing Profession in India" in a volume entitled *Anthropology and Nursing*.

I am from Calicut, in Kerala and went to high school there. At that time, Calicut was indeed a small place, and most students used to go to either Madras or Trivandrum for their higher education. I went to Madras (now Chennai), where I got my Bachelor's degree from Presidency College, and my M.A (Hons.) degree from Madras University in 1956.

Soon after my M.A, I started looking for a job. At that time, it was common for Kerala and Madras University graduates to go to Bombay or Delhi for jobs. Professor Janaki Sethana, one of my neighbors in Calicut, was the Head of the Geography Department of M.S. University, Baroda (now Vadodara). She urged me to come with her to Baroda, and I did so. Soon after my arrival, I was appointed a tutor in Political Science Department, and a few years later, I became a lecturer in Political Science.

In 1958, I was married to Professor Somjee, who is known as Som. While inter-caste marriages were not very common in Gujarat then, in Baroda, particularly, they were. The very name of the university, "M.S. University of Baroda", was referred to by the locals as "Marriage Settlement" University of Baroda. This is because so many marriages were of that nature among the faculty, and people thought that the University had something to do with it. It was a bold move on our part, and the University staff welcomed it.

We lived in *Adhyapak Niwas*, which was a grand old building where Professors and Readers lived. Gradually, I got deeply involved in my husband's ongoing studies in villages of Gujarat. I picked up Gujarati language from our students, maids, and female village respondents whom I used to interview. And that continued for a number of years.

Simultaneously, I got interested in India's socialists, and started my Ph. D thesis on them.

In 1961, two professors from the London School of Economics (LSE) visited Baroda University. They were Professor T.B. Bottom ore and Professor W. Robson. They were charmed by our village studies and wanted us to go to LSE to lecture on it. So they invited my husband to lecture on his findings. I accompanied him. We were at LSE for nearly a year. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I was registered as a graduate student at the School, and interacted with many graduate students and professors. I was put under the supervision of Professor Robson. Robson was very kind to me and wanted

me to stay on at the School and finish my Ph.D. there. And that created a dilemma. After much discussion and thought, I finally decided to return to Baroda with my husband, and finish my dissertation there.

Simultaneously, I was deeply involved in Som's village studies in Gujarat. I was dreaming of doing something similar on my own after my doctorate. I started looking at women in various villages to understand the way they were managing their household work along with an ambition to carve out their own niche.

The fieldwork in villages of Gujarat, and particularly among their women, was most stimulating. In village after village, the women, after their backbreaking household work, had the time to take interest in dairying. Since they were the principle workers involved in dairying, their views on a variety of issues were important for dairy organizers. The more dairy workers were involved in making dairying efficient, the closer became their cooperation.

On their village visits, the senior dairy workers often just gossiped with the men. The junior officers, on the other hand, would be with the women in the cowshed, and would better understand the problems on the ground. It always took a bit longer for the senior administrators to become aware of the actual problems faced by women in dairying. And I became aware of the problem while talking to senior as well junior officials.

The women of Gujarat, and in particular those of Kheda district, which was our focus, did not disappoint me. Kheda district is known for its many achievements including AMUL, which is a highly successful dairy organization, entirely run by its members. I initially concentrated on women involved in AMUL. My interest was whether dairying as a profession had an impact on women's thinking, and whether it had given them new opportunities. And I was delighted to find that through cooperative dairying women were acquiring new roles for themselves.

I wrote out my findings from this research in my first book, *Narrowing the Gender Gap*, which was published many years later, in 1989 by St. Martin's Press, New York. The book deals with the constraints imposed on the women by the network of social relationships, the attitude of men, and gaps in social policy. What I found was that the women were gradually overcoming these constraints by participatory processes within newly created economic and political institutions.

Year after year, the women of Kheda district, instead of accepting the existing situation, went on creating new opportunities for themselves, thanks to cooperative dairying, to attain greater and greater freedom for themselves. In Kheda, dairying as a profession has more or less been taken over by women, without any significant discussion or debate over what men or women should be in charge of. Dairying as a profession was well suited for whatever women were used to doing. And what was more, the women brought about all these changes without letting men realize or feel that they had lost something. Dairying was something new and different, in which the women were deeply involved, and their men did not mind that.

Research is yet to be done in determining how much the new economic enterprise went straight into the hands of women. While men were involved, initially, in dairying, women did the actual work in the cowsheds. While men talked about dairying, women were getting deeply involved in the range of work which dairying demanded. And at times men were even coached by their women folk on what all to say in meetings that they were going to attend.

In 1983-84, Wellesley College, located in the suburbs of Boston in the U.S., invited me to join them as an academic. And that was the most fruitful year of my career. I interacted with various faculty members and interested them in Indian women. Wellesley is one of those sober places that do not jump into any side.

Fortunately, I could join Wellesley once again in 1988-89, when Som was at Harvard. And even now I have good relations with Wellesley College.

I personally believe that places like women study organization at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, and Wellesley College in the U.S. are very much needed elsewhere. These programs concentrate on women and their capabilities, without entering into fights with men. They have discovered what women have done, and can do, if they are allowed to do it with the understanding of the men around them. While they want to move into areas that are new, and in some cases old, what they do not want to do is to become hostile to men. And men, practically all over the civilized world, understand that and move out of their way.

Chances are that in the developed countries, as well as in developing countries, women will gain or regain the territory that they had lost in the natural evolution of sexes. And this is one progression I would avidly like to watch.

In the year 1989, I published a book, with my husband, under the title of *Reaching Out to the Poor, The Unfinished Rural Revolution*. This was published by London, Macmillan, in hard cover and paperback.

I was also interested in nursing as a profession and the role of nurses in India. I was affiliated to Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University. And they invited me to write a paper on nursing as a profession in India. I agreed and contributed a chapter on *Social Change in the Nursing Profession in India*, which was included in *Anthropology and Nursing*, edited by Pat Holden and Jenny Littlewood, and published by Routledge, in London and in New York, in 1991.

Finally, Som and I jointly published one book in Canada, namely, *Poverty, Gender, and Human Development: Context-Effective Cooperative Approaches*, (De Sitter, 2005). This book was dedicated to “the milk producers of India who, through their cooperative effort, achieved the impossible.” They have made India the largest producer of milk in the world.

I think Som and I were among the first batch of Indian scholars who spoke and wrote about India, at a time when the western world did not have much interest in other countries. It took quite an effort to be seen and heard at leading universities. But we were at it.

Gradually and without any extraordinary event, the situation began to change. India required a herculean effort to pull itself out of poverty and destitution, and what was more democratically. Som and I were there to watch it and report on it. I am glad that we have lived through those turbulent times and were able to report on our findings. ❖

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