



Ela R Bhatt: A Trade Union leader who riveted the space of informal women workers in the Trade Union Movement

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## Epitome of Leadership

Several tributes have been written by colleagues and friends to pay homage to the life and values of our dear Ela ben (Ela R Bhatt) following her sad demise on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022. Ela ben was a woman of conviction and strength which made her to find novel and creative methods to support the most marginalized women, the informal workers in the country. Her multifaceted involvements made her revered in the field of social activism and also in the academic world. She was a special woman in her way of living, her style of behavior and communication and her compassion and empathy for the earth and the marginalized was well explicit throughout her life. As born in a family of freedom fighters,

her ideology was inspired by the freedom movement and Mahatma Gandhi. "Struggle and Development through the path of Non-Violence and Truth" was her path. For us in SEWA, Ela ben's passing away is a great loss to the movement as we have lost our visionary and guide. At the same time, her loss urges us to take up the challenge she has unfolded with more courage and clarity. Soon after her passing away, many friends and well-wishers have raised the concern of the future of SEWA and its leadership. She has created a feminist model of leadership within the movement through building up leaders. Ela ben retired from SEWA at the age of 65 and by that time she was sure that a new set of leaders have taken the responsibilities. That is the

uniqueness of the leadership that we have witnessed and experienced in Ela ben. The leadership during her tenure has been handed over to other leaders in the movement whom she has nurtured with her, and that continuity is still maintained. Ela ben followed the growth of the movement with great spirit and as a passionate guide in all the needs of SEWA.

### **Building a movement and its members**

SEWA was started as a small association of women workers in the informal sector in 1972. During the formation of SEWA as a union of informal workers, it was thought as organizing the workers who are the most marginalized, the self-employed and thrown out of their workplaces. She learned the importance of organizing through her association with the TLA (Textile Labor Association), a trade union of mill workers which was founded by Anasuya Sarabhai, an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi who wrote the constitution of TLA. The struggles of the mill workers who have lost their jobs and those who have found their own self-

employments through pulling carts, selling vegetables or clothes and stitching garments made her realize the unorganized nature of the work and the inured struggles they had to overcome in order to survive every day. She believed in the act of uniting women through building sisterhood and solidarity. She insisted that hard work is the only way to build up such organizations which is completely membership based in whatever forms. Thus, SEWA movement is realized as a confluence of three movements- the labor, cooperative and women's movements. It has become a National Trade Union of Women workers in the informal sectors spread over in 18 states with 25 Lakhs members and is the 8th among the recognized Central Trade Unions of India.

Over the years, through different organizational and institutional mechanism, SEWA has built a strong base with appropriate leadership with the combination of informal women workers representation and activists. As a person who led the movement from its beginning to a substantial period, she had envisioned and heeded its future through various approaches.

## **Advent of a new approach in Trade Union Organizing**

Bringing the informal workers collectively was a realization of the need for more concerted efforts of sustaining the varied needs of these informal workers. A different model of organizing emerged out of the need and demand of these workers to get recognition and rights. The frame of the dominant pattern of organizing workers still perseveres in relation to the employers, mostly in a fixed/permanent workspace and clearly defined employment relationships. The negotiations are always accomplished within those fixed relationships. Subverting that approach, Ela ben took the risk of organizing workers who had no direct employers or entirely invisible employers or no employers at all. This is the unparalleled formation of self-employed workers where they had no identity or recognition in the so-called value chain or labour market. Some of the categories or trades that were organized are street vendors, different categories of home-based workers like garment makers, handworkers, craft persons, beedi workers etc., waste pickers, construction workers who were otherwise not recognized as workers in the broader class definitions.

Getting recognition was one of the primary struggles that SEWA had to face in its onward journey. The existing framework of the labour laws could accommodate only industrial class of workers in the prescribed employer-employee relationships. Getting registered as a trade union of the informal sector was a herculean task. Here again the experiences in TLA have helped her to move towards a particular direction of legal recognition. Indira Jaising, a prominent lawyer in the Supreme Court had the courage to argue for the rights of the informal sector women workers in the tripartite negotiation table. That recognition after many years of fighting opened a rightful space for SEWA in the labour discourse of the country and worldwide. While massive eviction and confiscation of the carts and goods of vendors were happening in Gujarat, the vendors had to directly approach the court to reclaim their only means of livelihood. These confiscated carts and the receipts of penalty became the proof of their existence as a worker which later helped them in acquiring license. These acts portray the leadership of Elaben who believed that documentation would support the struggle of the informal workers to get recognition.

A similar process was initiated in the case of home-based workers too. It is a reality that the Indian manufacturing industry and cottage /traditional industries rely on the work done by women who do their work mostly from their homes. Their skills are being converted to cheap labor without any measurement on the intensity of labour they carry out the production process. Elaben's intention to get recognition for the home-based workers became an international focus when the issue was taken by the International Labour Organization in its standard setting process. Convention 177 in 1996 emerged out of her great vision of bringing home-based workers in the purview of International Standards of labor. It was a long struggle she undertook to get recognition for this category of workers.

Collectivization of the informal workers urged her to widen the scope of organizing along broader situations of workers' lives. Patriarchal families had similar characteristics of women taking the responsibilities of the unpaid care labour which limits their participation in the economy and labor market. Women had no financial literacy or ownership over resources. Ela ben's visit to Israel gave her the opportunity to see the

working of cooperatives with trade unions. This exposure made her to replicate something similar to support the women workers. Those days women had to take loans from money lenders at unimaginable interest rates and they were ignorant of any saving methods. It was with women's confidence of collecting shares and form their own bank, Elaben initiated to support them to form a cooperative bank. From there many women owned cooperatives were formed with members as the shareholders to support their livelihood through work, familial support like childcare facilities, marketing support etc. These cooperatives led by women workers have turned to attract many around the globe as an exemplary support system for the workers in the informal economy. Ela ben was also a co-founder in 1979 of the Women's World Banking (WWB), a global network of microfinance organizations that assisted poor women. She served as chairperson of WWB from 1980 to 1988.

## Engaging with the state

Walking with the informal sector made her realize the engagement with the state seriously. She has

used the opportunity of becoming the Member of Parliament for raising the issues of the informal sector workers issues.

In 1986 Elaben was nominated to become a member of Rajysabha by the President of India where she served until 1989. In 1987, she chaired the National Commission on Self Employed Women. The Shram Shakti report that she brought under this capacity is the first ever document profiling macro analysis of women in the unorganized workforce. Her insidious effort to bring together an extensive report on the women in the informal sector got nationwide supports from feminist activists, academicians, and researchers, which was brought out in 1988. Further to this she continuously started raising her voice in the policy making process for the informal sector workers. Hers must have been the first voice heard in the parliament to regularize the street vendors as it is one of the major self-employment sources of informal workers. Apart from raising her voice in the Parliament and also later in the planning commission, she started seeking international alliances to raise the voice of these sector of informal workers. This led to the Bellagio declaration, the significant

moment for street vendors where an international collective of street vendors and hawkers' association was formed. Thereafter she started dialoguing with the policy makers in the country for a national policy for the street vendors which later got transformed into a central legislation for street vendors.

She became the member of the second national commission on labor which was constituted under the chairmanship of Shri. Ravindra Varma in 1999. Under her leadership, SEWA played a vital role in bringing the concept of Umbrella Legislation for Unorganized workers. This later got watered down into the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008.

### **Partaking in wider movements for social change**

Elaben was one of the founding members of 'The Elders' group formed with the leadership of Dr. Nelson Mandela, Graca Machel and Desmond Tutu in 2007 in Johannesburg. This world known initiative had their significant contributions to peace building and peace making in conflict zones,

resolving cross border disputes, and formulating sustainable development goals. Elaben was particularly involved in this group on equality of women and girls and a campaign titled, “Girls, not Brides’ against child marriages in Asia and Africa. She became an emeritus member of the group in 2016. She was bold enough to take strong positions against the communal struggles in 1969 and the anti-reservation riots in 1981.

### **Encouraging the present generation towards a vision for next 50 years**

Elaben has trusted our leadership in the movement, and she always made us feel about her passion and care as someone who was following our engagements in different forums. Vision of SEWA for the next 50 years was one of her flowing thoughts in all our recent interactions. This clarity of her vision was overpoured in the 50th year celebrations of SEWA. From ‘We are Poor but So Many’ to ‘Anubandh’, she has penned intelligibly about the space for the poor and marginalized in this world and the methods of

sustainability and sustenance. The idea of building holistic and mutually beneficial communities is narrated through building up her arguments. The idea of transforming 100 miles communities’ concept pragmatically comes from her vast experiences. This emerged out of her interaction with the life of poor workers who struggle for minimum wages through the structural linkage of informality with global capitalism. ‘Anubandh’, she describes as “a way for us to think about what we do and plan ...for all”. We have experienced the change Elaben has made in the lives of millions of poor women workers. Perhaps she took us all into the next 50 years and inspired us to think about the changes that we need to bring about in the next fifty years. She urged us to think about our companions to walk along in this journey and means to inspire many to join us. That was her final mission, and we assure her that we are together in this journey. That would be the most conscientious tribute to her!