



Elaben As I Saw Her

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Ela Bhatt, fondly addressed as Ela-ben needs no introduction. She is etched in the hearts of millions, both as a mother and sister. She was the last heritage of rare world leaders with Gandhian spirit of ethos in non-violent struggle. Her life, like Gandhiji's, was her message! She led a simple life in a small house that welcomed one and all. Her visits to different places in an old autorickshaw was known to everyone in Ahmedabad. This mode of transport had become an icon of representation for decades. She would embrace any challenge, and be present for crucial meetings even in the scorching heat of 48 degree Celsius, with the help of her iconic transport.

She began her work as a labour leader and lawyer to support the textile mill workers, when it occurred to her that strike-torn textile workers had no means of livelihood. Tormented by this realization, and in a bid to help their wives earn a livelihood, she introduced the biggest ever 'Yagna', a SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (SEWA).

Millions of women from diverse backgrounds, urban, and rural areas, slums, those with a conservative attitude/mindset, the ones who were illiterate, all of them joined forces to emerge as a community of two million to fight for their right. She represented the common people as their lawyer and waged a war on the inhumane attitude of ruthless lawmakers, politicians,



Photograph of Anamik Shah (left) along with Ela Bhatt (right)

and bureaucrats. She knocked at the door of justice, and after several years of relentless efforts filed the first petition against the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in the Supreme Court. Her battle to acquire space for the 327 vegetable vendors bore fruit and the result was the "Street Vendors (Protection of livelihood and Regulation of Street vending) Act, 2014.

Her journey, from SEWA to SEWA Cooperative Bank, to Rural Urban Distribution Initiative (RUDI) for marginal farmers, farm labourers and rural women is noteworthy. Apart from providing a source of income, she also bolstered confidence in the "illiterate" women who brought about a massive transformation of securing equal daily wages from tobacco farms in Gujarat. It was quite an unusual

experience for the former Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Shri Raghuram Rajan, to witness the economically empowered women of SEWA repaying their dues multiple times and supporting their family financially.

Her working style was soft but firm, democratic, considering every opinion and making a note of it in her daily diary. She would give pertinent suggestions about the pedagogy of Gandhian legacy at Gujarat Vidyapith which was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920. She fulfilled her role as a Chancellor for the university for almost 7 years during which she provided beneficial advices and enlightened the convocation ceremonies through her simple, yet meaningful addresses. She shared the stage with renowned invited dignitaries like Late

President Pranab Mukherji, Dr Sam Pitroda, Dr Abhay Bang, Dr Prakash Amte, Shri Azim Premji, Balkrishna Doshi and many more. She was a strong believer in the pedagogy that focussed on community living, self-reliance, social service, humanity, ethics, wearing khadi and weaving khadi, common prayer, daily cleaning of rooms, and hostel campus by inmates and performing one's own chores in the kitchen and campus. Nevertheless, she was always mindful to ensure that students, especially girls, were not devoid of access to and training in modern technology and soft skills. Her initiative at SEWA, to equip non-English speaking women (whom we might classify as illiterates) with technological/computer skills to enable them to work in several foreign countries has created a confidence and desire to replicate the model at the Vidyapith.

In our marathon meetings, comprising of trustees, faculty, and academic council members, Ela-ben would always forewarn us about bringing about change just for the sake of change, without recognizing the need for it. She was rather critical about the top-down approach to change and fervently advocated that for change

to be effective, it should follow the bottom-up approach. She often suggested, "Let us do Gandhiji's work in our organizations without naming Gandhi." Her books, "Anubandh" and "We are poor, but so many" are legendary and exceptional contributions to mankind who seek to recognize the path of sustainable development and practice peaceful means of resistance, abiding by "truth and non-violence". Her actions and contributions will be reminisced by and guide future generations on the real path to progress and prosperity for all.

