

Tribute

Ela Bhatt
1933 - 2022

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The Indian women's rights movement has lost a visionary and powerful leader of poor and marginalised women workers and self-employed women facing intersectional vulnerabilities in the labour market, factor market and product markets in the informal sector. Her passing has created an immeasurable void in the democratic spaces that strives for dignity of individual and social cohesion. Elaben always stood by the underserved sections of society in the urban, rural and tribal areas. She supported the survivors of 1969 communal riots and 1980 anti-reservation riots in which the Dalit families were attacked.

I got in touch with Elaben during early 1970s when the textile mills were closing their doors to the women workers. I was student of M.S. University and a member of the Study and Struggle Alliance in Vadodara. We were working for textile workers of Vadodara. At that time, Elaben was a young lawyer of Textile Labour Union founded by Gandhiji and Anasuyaben Sarabhai.

In 1969, Gujarat saw violent communal riots targeting Muslim localities, shops and bustees. In this highly charged environment of religious bigotry, Elaben stood tall among the survivors of riots- mainly widows, orphans, elderly who had lost their young boys and men, property, shops and homes and had lost all hopes of rebuilding their devastated lives. Elaben not only extended her helping hand in relief operations but also encouraged these 'women headed households' to start business as vegetable vendors, hawkers of food items, weavers of handloom, artisans producing handicrafts, embroidery workers and come together under the umbrella of SEVA

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women's cooperatives. When they were prevented from selling their products in the streets of central Ahmedabad, she encouraged them to protest in peaceful sit-ins in front of the District Collector's office.

SEWA and IAWS

Elaben formed world's first women's trade union, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) to fight against exploitation and discrimination in the labour market. Over the last 50 years, it has put in place structures and systems for income generation programmes, self-employment, social security, housing rights, financial inclusion, health insurance and human development investment through collective efforts of the working class women. During this year of Golden Jubilee Celebration, there are so many inspiring and evocative stories and vignettes have been shared in SEVA's monthly newsletter, *Anasuya* in Gujarati and Hindi!

In 1981, Elaben invited Trupti Shah, who was active in Manthan, Vadodara and me to conduct cultural workshop at the newly established trade union office of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) that was formed in 1972. It was very insightful to talk to Elaben and her enthusiastic and erudite husband, Prof. Ramesh Bhatt who taught economics at H. K. Arts College of Gujarat University. Elaben found reaching out through cultural medium of songs, street plays, documentary film screening, photographic memories, storytelling and exposure trips extremely valuable to develop synergy among women members of SEWA. We stayed at her home and enjoyed simple Gujarati meal warmly served by the couple. At SEVA, Bhadra, Ahmedabad office, She also introduced us to different divisions and production units of SEVA. We had great time singing feminist songs, improvising plays and experimenting with street-theatre format and watching documentary films in Gujarati on legal rights of women made by Dinazben Kalwachwala of India Space Research Organization (ISRO), Ahmedabad. She translated her favourite song, *We shall overcome* into to rustic/colloquial Gujarati as '*Ame Paar Karishun.....*'.

In 1981, in the midst of anti-reservation agitation in Gujarat, she vocally supported the reservation policy enshrined in the Constitution of India and when angry anti-reservation rioters came to burn her house and pelted stones at her, Elaben and Rameshbhai stood peacefully, firm, and poised. The robust women's rights movement and nascent women's studies movement stood by courageous Elaben and invited her to address the plenary of the First Women's Studies Conference hosted by SNTD Women's University in Mumbai. When Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) was formed, Elaben and several office bearers of SEVA became not only its life members, but also actively participated in the IAWS Conferences.

In 1985, Elaben led SEWA's delegation at the United Nations' End of the Decade conference Here once again we witnessed her humane style mentoring and hand holding of SEWA members in those 10 days of the Conference attended delegates from 165 countries.

In 1986, when Elaben became member of Rajya Sabha, Dr. Neera Desai and myself visited her at her official Delhi residence. She welcomed us with great affection and enthusiastically

showed us her labour of love, vegetable garden that she had nurtured. She chaired the National Commission on Self Employed Women in 1987. When she decided to come up with *Shram Shakti* Report profiling macro analysis of women in the unorganised sector workforce, hundreds of women's rights activists, scholars, researchers from all states and union territories of India, supported her initiative voluntarily by providing collective data, case studies, field reports to produce a mammoth *Shram Shakti Report*, 1988. We, as *Narimukti* Collective of Gujarat, translated *Shramshakti* Report into Gujarati in 1989. *Mahila Daxata Samiti* Delhi and Mumbai republished Hindi and Marathi translations, respectively.

Under her leadership SEVA played pivotal role in enacting *The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act* (2008), *National Rural Livelihood Mission* (2011) and *Street Vendors Act* (2014). In the II Labour Commission's Report two chapter- on informal sector and child labour stand out for their commitment to social justice and workers' rights. For both these chapters were drafted by the SEVA team.

The Elders

In 2007, South Africa, Elaben was invited to attend the meeting convened by Nelson Mandela, Graça Machel, and Desmond Tutu in Johannesburg in which a group of world leaders arrived at a consensus to contribute their wisdom, independent leadership and integrity to tackle some of the world's toughest problems under the banner of The Elders. Its commitment is for peace building, peace keeping and peace-making in the conflict zones, resolving cross-border disputes, sustainable development goals. Elaben Bhatt was particularly involved in The Elders' initiative on equality for women and girls and the campaign titled, 'Girls, not Brides' against child marriages in Asia and Africa. In 2009-2010, Elaben made two visits to the conflict zones of the Middle East with Elders delegations and averred that, 'Nonviolent work demand more hard work than fighting' and 'cowards use weapons'. In 2011, She visited Bihar with the fellow Elders- Mary Robinson, Desmond Tutu and Gro Harlem Brundtland. Together, the Elders and had a dialogue with the members of *Jagriti*, a youth-led project aimed at preventing child marriages in Bihar, and motivated the state government of Bihar to make concerted efforts to prevent child marriages with the help of community based development investment in education, nutrition and women empowerment.

Several obituaries by her colleagues and admirers have described Elaben as a 'gentle revolutionary'. Elaben won the hearts of activists and academicians, researchers and policy makers by her polite but firm style of communication, her refined sense of humour, warm hospitality that had a personal-Elaben touch, her courage of conviction and creative methods of finding solutions to unfolding challenges in the changing socio-economic and political realities that threatened the survival base of the urban, rural and tribal women. She was a secular humanists not only in her speeches but also in praxis. Recipient of Padma Shree, Padma Vibhushan, Magsaysay Award for Community leadership and *Frances Legion d; Honneur*, Right Livelihood Award, Indira Gandhi International Prize for Peace, *honoris causa* from Harvard-Yale-SNDT Women's University and many more; as well as innumerable prestigious awards from the state and non-state institutions all over the world, Elaben remained humble and accessible to all of us till the last day of her life. She could reach out to her listeners effectively, whether young students, working class women, elderly artisans, erudite

professionals, funders, global politicians and firebrand journalists. As Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad during 2015-2022, Elaben firmly adhered to Gandhian principles of non-sectarian and pluralist approach in governance.

A Gandhian

Elaben, as a true Gandhian followed the principles of simplicity, dignity of sweat labour, decentralization, economic self-sufficiency, cooperation, equality, non-violence, peacemaking, peace keeping, peace building, actions guided by human values of ethics and justice, social solidarity, empowerment of village production units and sustainable future by living in harmony with nature. She considered poverty and hunger as structural and systemic violence. Her inspiring values and beliefs conveyed in these statements, 'Let diversity be maintained, grow, flourish...'. 'Think correlately, creatively and respond with empathy and social solidarity when you face challenges in life'.

Elaben was a product of India's freedom movement and put into practice, Rabindranath Tagore's verses *Ekla Cholo Re*, when faced with adversities in her public life. She had a harmonious personal life. While working with poor women at the grass roots level, she acquired new wisdom from the grounded reality. Whether it was a matter of desirable rate of interest to be charged by SEWA Cooperative Bank or launching SEVA Insurance Programme, she consulted the members of SEWA. Currently SEWA Bharat has 21 lakh members in 18 states of India and luminaries such as Renana Jhabvala and Mirai Chatterjee who dedicated their whole life for the mission of SEWA and Elaben's dream of empowerment of unorganised and informal sector workers. ILO has recognised SEVA as a Trade Union.

During the lockdown in 2021, it was such a moral boost to find Elaben on zoom platform of Citizens Forum by Bharti Sinha Sahay when I made presentation on Gender Responsive Budgets. Her presence and encouraging comments meant a lot to me. We wanted her to address IAWS members, but now we have to satisfy ourselves with her inspiring memories.

Dear Elaben, we promise to continue your legacy of making dedicated efforts for social security, social protection of the unorganised sector workers and will amplify their voices. My heartfelt condolences to Elaben's daughter Amimayiben, son Mihirbhai and their family members, her colleagues and millions of members of SEWA.

Dear Elaben, your presence had a liberating influence over all those whose lives your touched. Rest in power Elaben. We promise to follow in your footsteps wherever we are.

I end this tribute with this beautiful verse that was often recited by Nelson Mandela.

Our Deepest Fear

by Marianne Williamson

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness
That most frightens us.

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We ask ourselves
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you *not* to be?
You are a child of God.

Your playing small
Does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine,
As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us;
It's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.