

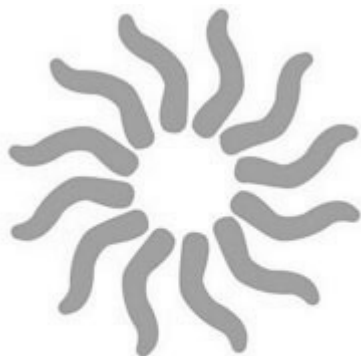
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from Design & People

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Sethu Das / January 2012

"In Conversation with Ela Bhatt"

"Social and Political Design" Open Electives team of the National Institute of Design (NID) meets with Smt **Ela Bhatt**, Founder of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) at her residence in Ahmedabad, Gujarat to seek her blessings and guidance. She welcomed Nitasha Sarangi, Daksh Batra, Sarang Desai, Upmanyudu Mullanpudi, Bhaktadas Bora, Benno Zindel, and Sethu Das and discussed on a wide-variety of topics — ranging from Women Empowerment to the bureaucracy of the United Nations.



SOCIAL INNOVATION & SUSTAINABILITY
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WORKSHOPS & SYMPOSIUM

IT was in 2009 that I got my first opportunity to meet and work with Smt Ela Bhatt, Founder of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). She was in Haryana to participate in the Hind Swaraj Centenary International Conference organised by Swaraj Peeth Trust and present a paper titled "Way Ahead: The 100 Miles". Since the event was organised to celebrate 100 years to discuss "Hind Swaraj" Gandhiji's root text, I decided to shift the focus of my conversation with Ela Bhatt to Hind Swaraj. "I have not fully read Gandhiji's Hind Swaraj text because of my continuous work in the field," she replied. This may sound a surprising to many of us, but not to someone who knew her activities for the betterment of the women in India. Probably this is what the Mahatma wanted to see his disciples doing.

"Way Ahead: The 100 Miles" principle by Ela Bhatt in her own words 'weaves decentralisation, locality, size, and scale, to livelihood'. "The social space defined by citizenship in a nation state is inadequate. Without membership in a community the nation state alone can be alienating and coercive — It provides liberty without freedom," she states in her explanation of the 100 Miles principle. Ela Bhatt continues to pen down her simple thoughts on her proposal in her small notebook.

As a part of my short-term teaching assignment at the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad on "Social and Political Change Through Design," in January 2012, I decided to take the entire team to meet with Smt Ela Bhatt, a pioneer in the empowerment of women in India, particularly in Gujarat. A Gandhian by thought and work, she welcomed Team NID — Nitasha Sarangi, Daksh Batra, Sarang Desai, Upmanyudu Mullapudi, Bhaktadas Bora, Benno Zindel, and me, to her residence at Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Elaben who is always surrounded by people seemed not worried about having so many of us sitting around her in her tiny room. While serving tea to guests, she also invited members to share their thoughts with her to start a meaningful and productive conversation.



Ela Bhatt, Founder of SEWA (Photos: Nitasha Sarangi)

Excerpts from the conversation:

Daksh Batra: Since I am a textile student, I am exposed to a lot of crafts and also talked to a few craftsmen, for example Shamji bhai who came from Bhujodi village told us that designers come to him with their designs and tell him to replicate it. He has no creative liberty and is used as a tool or a machine to make the final product. The Rabari community for example have banned people of their community from wearing their traditional attire because they cannot afford what they produce. How can we establish a balance between the production for the contemporary market and the creative liberty of the craftsmen?

Ela Bhatt: You see here in Gujarat the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) programme has not worked. But in Bihar while the weavers go for NREGA work programmes, it just involves pure manual labour. So they lose their skills. They have their looms, but all put aside somewhere in the house. We need weaving schools at the local level, and expose them to new designs, new tools and all those books. In my experience, if I say, we have block printers, we have what we call a design library. The name is big but not that library, but it's a library. These

woman artisans come and they see these designs and then they pick up some designs of their own, and then they are exposed to certain visitors. They look at their designs and meet some fashion design experts and they ask questions. That capacity and potential are there. We have so many weavers in the country, but we neither have weaving schools nor textile or embroidery schools of this kind, not even an agriculture school. After they pass your SSC with a certificate in science, then go to the college. And those who graduate not necessarily go to agriculture. Very few would perhaps go for agriculture like construction workers. They migrate for road construction. And those who already have these skills are no more needed. These days you need multi-skills. If you are doing a local school in construction work, one labourer would learn all skills as well like – flooring, plastering and all other things.

Actually the investments should go in such skill developments, skill upgradation, diversifying some skills related to that. But what happens is that India has very good performance at the higher education, but all these school dropouts, may be primary school seventh pass also does not know fully well to read and write and count. After that the school dropouts have nothing else to do. Even if you insist on them doing farming, the sons and daughters of farmers are not going for farming. They do not have that skill. So how do we upgrade these occupations? In countries like the US, you see community colleges, night schools where things are so flexible whoever wants to and we have local skills who are experienced not necessarily only old, they are there who can be trained to be teachers. We do not need some high-degree-wallah teachers. That is the whole area where no investments have ever gone in to. If these weavers are exposed more and more in different ways, then they may also pick up on their own more as also will have to work as they want a regular income. But to stand on his own as a weaver in the mainstream market is a long way. A lot of handholding, supportive positive policies, enough budgetary support, all that is needed.

Your designs schools can bring this point of view.

Upmanyudu Mullanpudi: Do you think your model of empowering women can also be implemented in male-dominated societies?

Ela Bhatt: It is the same society everywhere. SEWA is not a model. It is basically a trade-union. But our uniqueness is our design of a trade-union. We challenged the very definition of work and trade union. All along it has been only in industrialised work where there is a specific employer-employee relationship and that only can have a trade union. We challenged that and said anybody who is economically active and working – either self-employed or a combination of different modes of working – they are all workers and they can come together and form a union.



Smt Ela Bhatt, Founder of SEWA with the NID Open Electives Team — Nitasha Sarangi, Daksh Batra, Sarang Desai, Upmanyudu Mullapudi, Bhaktadas Bora, Benno Zindel, and Sethu Das.

Upmanyudu Mullapudi: Do you also monitor whether the money earned by the SEWA women is finally being used effectively?

Ela Bhatt: No, we cannot monitor a family. However, what we have been able to do is strengthening them in terms of values and in terms of independence, in a positive way. It takes time, but it does happen. When they are in groups and come together, they have a support. Other than their own family relations for them this is a new kind of support of collectiveness because they are the members of the union. The other things is, we also have SEWA Cooperative Bank that also has a new access to power, which is finance, may be for the first time. They have their savings accounts. They save for different purpose for their lifecycle needs and they also borrow and when and what to borrow and like that.

Anyway a woman being a being woman she brings her income to income and hence more security to the family. Usually she is very well accepted. It is a process. Slowly she strengthens her ability and she gains respect. Alcoholism is one of the biggest enemies of women and children. But men also do not have work. After work, youths have nothing else to do. Look at the climate around. There are always such touts who are always going to bring troubles and the whole concept of drinking is to show your superiority. If nobody else, then his wife. But men also need these good exposures and opportunities for employment.

Apne desh mein to yehi chahiye. Every hand should be productive. Everybody — rich, poor, educated, uneducated — they all want to get involved in the production forces of their own country. They want regular income, fair income and also combined with social security. Work security and social security are the two sides of the same coin, because they work at the cost of their health, they work at the cost of their children, their education. As soon as they fall ill, they loose income. We need a good social security system as well. It can be contributory. I am not saying it should be all governmental.

Am I talking something relevant or not?



Smt Ela Bhatt with Sethu Das, Co-founder of Design & People.



Daksh Batra (UG Textiles, NID) asks a question to Smt Ela Bhatt during the face-to-face at her Ahmedabad residence.

Bhaktadas Bora:How successful is SEWA in bringing people above the poverty line?

Ela Bhatt: (Laughs) This is a Planning Commission question!

Poverty goes up and down. It is difficult to monitor or to keep a track of it. Generally I would say that SEWA members have come out of starvation. They have enough to eat. They have enough to eat. They have some surplus by way of savings. They are also highly aware of what is happening around.

Below Poverty Line is a bogus idea. Those who are really under the poverty line are not able to access the Public Distribution System (PDS). Poverty goes down, and those who come up poverty line in few years they go down again. Some get old and their productivity goes down. You are asking the wrong person. I do not believe in this poverty line and free distribution of food in this way. When we have already seen that government system has miserably failed which quite a big issue. Why again we go into that?

Instead give more support to the producers. Grow more food and coarse grains. Let there be enough production which we had all these years. Now globally there is a food grain deficit. The whole of Africa is in famine. Here also till I was in planning commission in Gujarat, there was surplus. But in last ten years it has become food grain deficit. We should go to the root of these cause, how do we grow more coarse grains and put it in the market so that everybody can buy nutritious food at fair price. That is the way to go about. But we are just going the other way.

Daksh Batra: We were talking to few farmers in a village in Gujarat who only grew either tobacco or cotton, two cash crops. ITC pays them really high for growing tobacco, which is the reason why they do not grow any food grains. They have small farms and if a small portion of the farm is used for food grains, they would loose that much amount of money. So they have to go out to buy food. Earlier they used to grow bajra, jawar and other grains which are local to Gujarat. Today no one wants to buy bajra and jawar. This is the reason they go for cotton. Cotton is also decreasing because the market price of cotton has also gone down.

Ela Bhatt: You are absolutely right. There is so much of speculation.

The challenge is how we make small farming sustainable and viable. I think that is the challenge, not just giving subsidies and food. But there is so much employment — in this *roti, kapda makkhan* condition. For examples, animal husbandry and forestry and fisheries provide ample opportunities for work. That's why need planning, in such a way that we are productive. Our labour is used in a productive way, and that sustain Mother Earth, that sustains the family. Middle class also needs to think what they are consuming — unnecessary consuming, unnecessary things. Children eating those packed snacks! Children have become thoughtless! We are spoiling our children.

Sethu Das: Our educational institutions which are centres of learning are also flooded with multinational toxic drinks and food products. Do you think awareness alone can work or there is a need for enforcement as well?

Ela Bhatt: I think 70 percent awareness and 30 percent restrictions — not a violent type of a ban. If people understand themselves, then at least they would know they are doing wrong, or half-wrong or this can be avoided. If I have two pairs of shoes then I do not need a third one. So let us not buy. My son has a principle which is very hard — do not buy things unless you do away with the old one.

Sethu Das: Moving away from the local issues, you recently addressed a gathering at the global meet of the UN Development Programme with the Secretary General. This is a rare opportunity and a honour for an individual because such meets are usually meant for the head of nations. What exactly was your message to the world leaders who are responsible for the poverty we see around us?

Ela Bhatt: I did not mention poverty so much. Just wait and see what has been the impact of what they have so far done; where is the need to revisit or rethink or change; think fresh or new. Because they are all UNDP — programmewallahs and heads of the regions. And question like whether urbanisation is development or technology is by itself development and just wait and think; and what are the ways of dealing with hunger.

Hunger is violence. To keep people jobless or hungry is violence. Other thing was of course decentralisation and a little bit of 100 Miles — developing autonomy and diversify. Without improving the lives of farmers and artisans no country and people can develop. Third was to evaluate. I talked how we evaluate in SEWA to see if we are in the right track or missing. We have ten questions in SEWA. That part became very popular. "Urbanisation is not development" became the headline. I repeated that. I started with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and ended with MDGs. Lastly I started with MDGs goals if we follow these eight goals, I think we have done the job, the whole world is going to be happy, content and peaceful.

Sethu Das: Was your suggestion well-received?

Ela Bhatt: These questions went well. They've been writing to me again and again following that. MDF is taking little more importance. Putting all these things piecemeal is nothing, it is meaningless. It has to have a holistic and broad vision and mission to do there, for the United Nations.

Sethu Das: Are you hopeful about an outcome from the meeting?

Ela Bhatt: *Kya hopeful!* UN is a big big bureaucracy (Laughs).

Sethu Das: That's the reason I asked.

Ela Bhatt: It is working. They give you awards and PhDs and all that, but that lesson does not get translated into mainstream policies. I just stopped, since long, going for any government policy meetings.

Sethu Das: But you are a part of the Reserve Bank of India board, right?

Ela Bhatt: I am very keen late on final inclusion. They do the due-diligence. Reserve Bank of India's due-diligence on me took three years. But we have a good Board now. I am hopeful. My main concentration is financial inclusion. I do not get into other things. And I also do not understand so much of inflation, prices etc.

Sethu Das: You come from a law background, right?

Ela Bhatt: Yes. Whatever law I learnt it did not become useful. The workers I started unionising they happened to be the 90% of the workforce of the country and they are not covered by any law.

Sethu Das: But only a lawyer can do that!

Ela Bhatt: (Laughs) And then the laws were there, but never got implemented. I am not enthusiastic at all for any new legislation.

Benno Zindel: I was interested in knowing how SEWA has influenced men's attitude and behavior towards women in India over the last few decades?

Ela Bhatt: Among poor it is not too much of a man-women thing, though not that they are not equal. But women have pretty much of freedom — socially and economically. May be because she is an economic component of the family. There are laws and customs regarding marriage and children are very flexible. If she does not get along with the husband, she just walks out on her own. She can marry again. In the lower cast all these are very flexible. I believe it is because she has the economic power. I believe that is because we have the economic power or owning. My experience with men is not so negative.



Smt Ela Bhatt in conversation with the students from the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad. Sarang Desai and Sethu Das next to her.



Benno Zindel: My question was not meant to be negative in any way. I was only wondering why you started this organisation for women and not for men.

Ela Bhatt: I was working in textile labour union which was started by Gandhi ji in 1912-17. I joined in 1955 as a lawyer and then slowly I got involved with Labour Court practicing labour laws. So these were all textile workers well covered by labour legislations, in terms of their remuneration, working conditions and compensations. I was fighting for their rights in the court, and we were a very strong union. Then in the late 1980s, the mills started closing down. Then our leaders asked me to go and find out how these workers of the closed mills are able to maintain their families – what is the condition of their families. They were all the time busy in the union rallies and court cases. I did the survey and found out that it was the women who were the breadwinner of all these families. And because they were working and earning, families at least pulled on. Then it opened my eyes. Then I saw what is the kind of work they are doing. So they were home-based producers, they were cart-pullers, garbage pickers, street vendors and hawkers. I said these are the other occupations and my background being in trade unions, I said why not unionise them. They happen to be a massive workforce of the country, who are not even recorded as workers in the Census of India. They are already working but unfortunately they present themselves never as a worker. So then I said they should be unionised because that is the only way I understood at that time. Now I think it was fortunate to go that way. Their work slowly became visible. For that organising is most important. For visibility, that we are here. Then for their voice. Because when they are organised, then a point comes when someone is able to have dialogue with you including the government and policy makers etc. And then some validities. They are able to intervene at different policy levels or to bring new legislations and helping to get them passed.

So it was the women who are always left out. In unorganised sector, or informal sector, whatever is it called... In the US they are called black economy. But in informal economy, these workers, more than half of them being women, are at the lowest rung of the structure of the workforce. I have great faith in these women. These women particularly. Even otherwise. One is that women's income is very important for the survival of a family. When different types of micro studies are done, in general it has come out that about 33 percent of the women are the soul supporters of the family, amongst poor which is also informal. Either men are awaiting for work because for them any work is not work and they wait and wait and in this process they get depressed. High level of depression among men. Then another 50 percent of the families were where more than 50 percent of the family income comes from women. Then in my experience, particularly through the SEWA Bank, I saw that asset is safer in the hands of women than in the hands of their men. She by nature is more future-oriented. She is also a better fighter against poverty, against wrath of nature. She is too much responsible for the family, to feed the family. So there is great future

in the women and in their leadership. For that you need to invest a lot in them. They are so resourceful and so ready to get organised. I was there at the National Commission on Women in the Informal Sector and we traveled to 18 states and held more than 4,000 meetings taking evidences and talking to women. Everywhere I found that the women knew that they had some rights, in the back of their minds they knew — may be because of Mahatma Gandhi or Indira Gandhi. They knew they have some rights, and they were also ready to get organised. They were ready for new ideas, new exposures — all over India I would say. All these were invariably in groups. There will be two or three such women, not so young bit with bright eyes, to take the leadership or do something. There also I got a great hope in women. And in my daily experience I see that. If village women left out alone would travel to Santa Fe, USA where her products are on display and for sale in an exhibition, she can and she does. So informal sector is the future of the economy and women are the future of leadership.

Sethu Das: I was wondering if there is a question from Natisha, though she has come only to document the session. Do you have a question for Ela ji?

Nitasha Sarangi: Natisha Sarangi: Even after having so many policies, situation with girl's education and women empowerment remains unchanged. Male person of the family holds the right to acquire the wealth of the family. It is sad that even after 50 years of our independence, the equality between men and women has not come to that level. What is the future of the women in India?

Ela Bhatt: No. I do not think so. I see women as a future. And women have done far better than men, worldwide. Women are finding their way. I think the mentality of the society is changing. They are getting all these new opportunities that their mothers did not have. Instead of men sitting on decision-making positions, in so many cases women are being preferred as they have performed better, whenever given opportunities. Of course women have to work harder. But I think keep faith, and keep the spirit. There is so much difference in that sense. If you see, for example, the age of marriage of our grandmother, then our mother, then our own, it has made good improvement now. It takes time to change.

One thing about women is that women also need to change their mentality. Particularly when they think their... Feminists also... and most of the women under feminist influence. They think that motherhood is a burden, then household work is a burden. Actually both are very empowering regions. If you take it in terms of control, then you have far more control over the next generation than the father. And household work is a very skill-developing activity. That is why those women who has done housework, they are far better in their performance and develop their intelligence as well, applications and multitasking etc. So women should see this household work and childbirth as their privilege. We are already empowered more than men. God has given us certain gifts. Women will be feminine. You understand what I mean to say. Feminine not in dressing, but in the way of thinking. And the feminine way of thinking involves togetherness. Women in general, I have seen that... If you give some work to somebody, she will not do it alone. She will take somebody with her to do that work. To shop something or... She will take somebody together. She has that togetherness. She has a futuristic [future-oriented] approach, may be because of biological reasons. Maintaining relationships... all that is the feminine way. We should also honour the feminine way in men, they are so many men like that also. I think that is another thing women should realise and develop further.

Sethu Das: I think we have taken so much of time of yours. The mosquitoes have started entering your house. We thank you very much for your time. There are videos and writings about you easily available in the Internet but we were looking forward to have your blessings and direction in our work.

Ela Bhatt: Because you are sitting, these windows are not closed (Laughs). I am very happy to have you. Because I learn a lot from you. But today only I have been speaking. Someday I would like to hear your views on superpower, India Shining etc.

Thank you. And all the best to you!



(Transcriber & Editing: Sumandro Chattapadhyay, Shilpa Mirpuri)

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