

'SEWA PIONEERED BY ELABEN WAS INNOVATIVE EXPERIMENT'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Role of NGOs, SHGs, Donors & Charities, and Institutional & other Stakeholders in Development Process

Elaben Bhatt

Elaben Bhatt, a legendary figure in post-Independent India, passed away in Ahmedabad on November 2. Her demise is a grievous loss to the nation. SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) pioneered by her was one of the most innovative and successful experiments in India in the field of social development. SEWA empowered women in India in the comprehensive sense of the term on a scale never witnessed before.

It simultaneously provided employment to women and promoted cooperative production, consumption and marketing of textiles which constituted the core of India's industrialisation. It also decisively influenced the course of trade unionism and labour movement in India.

For her work, Elaben received numerous accolades and was conferred several national and international awards including Padma Bhushan, Magsaysay Award and the Indira Gandhi Sadbhavna Award. She was a Member of Parliament and of the Planning Commission of the Government of India. She used all these opportunities to bring about a structural improvement in the condition of Indian women.

Elaben was simplicity incarnate, both in the way she lived and interacted with people and expressed herself. She was often seen dressed in plain white sari with tastefully designed border.

In recalling my association with Elaben, an incident that comes to my mind is my consultation with her on the telephone on my taking up the task of promoting Grameen Bank movement in India pioneered by another visionary of the Indian sub-continent, Muhammad Yunus.

Professor Yunus had sounded me to take a lead in establishing and directing a company which would bring together all the existing projects of the Grameen Bank in India and aim to broaden the Grameen Bank movement in the country. I sought Elaben advice on whether I should plunge into this venture on nearly a full-time basis. Her advice was clearly 'no'.

For, she did not believe that employment for women could be created and sustained by a simple banking device. Any sustainable and rewarding employment must involve women's participation in the process of production, consumption and distribution. In the process, they should acquire education and skill, create institutions of their own and enhance their bargaining strength.

Elaben gracefully accepted the invitation extended to her for participating in the World Conference on Recreating South Asia, held in New Delhi in February 2011, organised by the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) and Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS). She presented at the conference a beautifully written creative piece under the title "Livelihood, nature and peace: a Grahini perspective".

Hundred Mile Principle

In this paper, she gave a perspective analysis of the objectives and special features of SEWA

and elaborated the Hundred Mile Principle and the Grahini Theory of International Relations propounded by her at that time. In short, the Hundred Mile Principle involved the “use of products and services primary to life that are solely produced within a radius of hundred miles”.

The Grahini Theory of International Relations combined such elements as elimination of poverty and deprivation as an essential requirement for establishing peace, a society free of violence and the need to bring nature into the peace process. This article is included as a chapter in the book “Democracy, Sustainable Development and Peace: New Perspectives on South Asia” co-edited by Akmal Hussain of Pakistan and myself and published by the Oxford University Press.

Elaben Bhatt left an indelible mark on the course of the history of social development in India. History is made by those who enter the scene in an unpretentious and self-effacing manner and leave a stamp of their originality and vision, and not by the procession of those who, to quote Shakespeare, make much sound and fury signifying nothing.

In conclusion, I bow my head to a personality who closely touched my heart and soul as that of the millions of other Indians and who left an indelible mark on the course of Indian history.

(The author is a former

Foreign Secretary)

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