

TOWARDS

SECOND FREEDOM



By:

Ela R. Bhatt

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

SEWA Reception Centre,
Opposite Victoria Garden,
Bhadra, Ahmedabad 380001
Gujarat, India.

Phone: +91-79-5506444 / 5506477 Fax: 91-79-5506446
Email: mail@sewa.org Website: www.Sewa.Org

The most sustained experience of my life since India's Independence is search for the Second Freedom, economic empowerment, of and with the poor and tolling women of India. For me, this half a century has been of constantly renewed fulfilment's in spite of the failures, disappointments, and some humiliations in my public life.

The First Freedom, political power, the country had achieved in 1947. The Second Freedom, economic power, it was yet to achieve. As I understand Gandhiji, the economic self-reliance was equally important for him as the political independence. He called economic poverty 'a moral collapse' of the society. True political change or technological change does not necessarily remove poverty because it does not remove economic exploitation. The problem of poverty and loss of freedom are not separate.

As the struggle for Independence was over, the atmosphere in the universities and the civic life was full of restless enthusiasm to rebuild the nation. I am a product of that early atmosphere and that fast spreading enthusiasm that somehow has not diminished in me though my level of physical energy is declining with years. I hungrily remember those days in the university when I had joined my efforts with the efforts of the upcoming student leaders, including my future husband. I was a timid lass, a college girl, yet had gathered the courage to join the efforts, like so many other young people at that time, to make personal and public meaning of the recently gained freedom from the foreign rule.

Our teachers threw us out of the people of India, particularly to the rural poor. Our parents did not very much stop us from our journey to these people. Over period of time we realised that the right to vote was not enough for the poor and women. They wanted a voice and visibility.

As poor, they wanted to come out of day-to-day survival. As women, they wanted opportunities to learn and to act. As the workers in India's self-employed sector, they wanted to be a part of the labour movement. As Dalits and minorities they wanted to move in from margins to the mainstream. Yes, they wanted a voice and visibility. It took still more years for us to realise that this was not possible without access to and ownership of economic resources by these poor women. Coming out of their state of exploitation by men, society, and the State, the poor,

poor women, wanted to enjoy what we at SEWA now call Second Freedom: Doo Sri Azadi.

In some ways, the yearning for the Second Freedom surpassed us. It pushed us each year to develop adventurous attitude, enlarge the scope of the search and see that the sense of hope and humour could be raised above the level of destiny, 'God's will' or the system to be blamed. I was spending my teenage in getting prepared for the students' agenda of building of the nation in whose lap we grew, and then spending 40 years of my adult life (1955-1967) in actually trying to build women, us, for Second Freedom. I feel very proud of my nation, and I am proud of the strength of our sisters. I do feel like celebrating the future of the past 50 years of India's independence in which India is coming centre stage in global forces, progressive and other.

Gandhi's thinking has shown us the way, a clear direction, leading us to commitment, sustained efforts, a gentle but firm belief in women's leadership in social change, and willingness to see beyond what was around. What has been inspiring about this search is realising how much we did and can do much much more, how significantly we transformed the place and time we have been through, and what is more inspiring is that it does not occur to us not to.

Fifty years of freedom. Twenty five years of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), (1972-1997). My early decade in college (1947-1957) and fifteen formative years at the Textile Labour Association (TLA) (1957-71). How neatly all these years and up. And yet how difficult it is for me to separate one chunk of time from the other, matching these periods with experience of the people I have worked with, achievements that they have made, insights that my friends have Gained from outside. I try to put on these bands of time boundaries and bulk of experience break. I wonder how historians sort out this module.

More complexity I face when I try to decide what is the cause and what is the impact, what is the impact and what is its influence. I try to read up scholarly material to make sense, gain a framework, and as soon as I am faced with the reality of SEWA members, the poor women, the framework fails me, often completely. Theories are left far behind in the gold dust of life.

Anyway, years before SEWA will serve as early years for our current purpose of mapping our search for Second Freedom and I will try to locate roots of achievements and insights gained after SEWA into those years. It is not easy, and also reasonable, for me to move much away from my own direct experience of reality in SEWA. It is even more difficult for me to build a model for the role of NGOs, in India or in its sister countries.

When a SEWA member has a room of her own, a farm of her own, a wall of her own, or a forest of her own, as she moves towards full employment at her level, I have seen minutely, how she experiences economic freedom. She has more 'operational freedom' on day-to-day basis on her world of work and arrives at a bargaining position in the dealing with the local vested interests, inside or outside her own home. Land reforms, green revolution; and water management were the nation-wide initiatives of the early years. It is these later years that they gained operational meaning through organisations such as SEWA. As a result SEWA membership grew now to 2,50,000 from then of 5,000 women. Therefore, the role NGOs is also to take development concepts a step further and operationalise them.

Access to financial services has been crucial for women, especially when poor. The nationalisation of banks at macro level in the early years changed the ownership of capital at national level but at micro level, for the poor women, access and ownership of capital was rare. The banks were nationalised towards the end of those early years but the credit did not reach poor women. Drawing lessons, we were determined in the later years to make capital formation and asset ownership at the grassroots by creating SEWA Co-operative Bank on the one hand as an alternative institutional arrangement, and on the other hand, created a web of about 100 co-operatives and 1000 producers groups at the grassroots as a broad base. Capital formation was a national agenda in those early years. But where this formation takes place became SEWA's agenda over the later years. Our SEWA Bank with 60000 poor, often illiterate, but always productive women as share holders and depositors has achieved financial heights and yet maintained poverty-removal as its main objective. Therefore the other role the NGOs can play is to build alternative sound financial institutions of and for the poor. Leverage of financial power in favour of the poor is a must now.

Building capacity of women to benefit from, influence, change or alter paradigm of development was, of course, not a separate priority in early years. The poor women's capacity to struggle and survive was great, but to participate in the mainstream as an equal was rare. We at SEWA gradually realised this and tried to build such capacity at the individual and organisational level. John W. Gardner then the president of the Carnegie Foundation, emphasised the importance of competence as a condition of freedom. Keeping a free society free and vital and strong is not easy. Free women, and men, must be competent.

We, in India and the USA, understand that this Second Freedom is not an inexpensive commodity, always there, like air. This Second Freedom is not given, it is being earned, fought for, and therefore retained, maintained, and cherished. Therefore, the other role of NGOs is to match what I have called Second Freedom for the poor with building competence. The world will never be safe for this Second Freedom without competence.

Therefore, women need access to capacity building mechanisms. They need opportunities to upgrade skills as well as to take advantage of available new technologies, better tools, improved product design, or export opportunities. And wait, I am not talking as a businessman. I am talking as a businesswoman. That is, to us as women, business is not equal to personal profit only. Having achieved profitability, focus shifts to what is done with that surplus, on the one hand, and on the other hand, how, with whose efforts, and in what circumstances this profit is made. You will see that when economic enterprise at SEWA become viable, and most of them, almost all, are the profit goes to the producer, the labour, the poor among customers. Also, the work, working conditions, in fact the whole world of work becomes a bit more comfortable to the women. The unbroken record of two decades of profits at SEWA Bank has ended up in the hands of its shareholders and depositors who are poor women; the Bank-team; the Bank-buildings and branches; the Bank-related services, and now in one of the largest user-managed Social Security Scheme in India. In the coming years when more American capital is invested in India, I suggest that the role of NGOs, of India and of their friends in the USA, is to change the thinking from that of an investor to that of an investee. Ensure that social costs are not more than the returns, and that they how and where and why the profits are used is of equal concern to how much profit is made.

Let me give a different example. "Vanlakshmi" is a landless agriculture women's co-operative in water scarce Mahesana district in Gujarat. In '60s and '70s the women had to wage a violent caste battle to gain access to the village land. Today, members grow crops for cash as well as for domestic food needs on the land they own jointly. They plant trees for fodder and fruits. The farms uses its own organic fertiliser. They have harvested rainwater into a pond lined with plastic sheet to stop seepage. The women of the co-operative have been using power tiller for higher productivity and lesser drudgery. "The co-operative has given me a chance to own land. It is our collective property", says Shantaben to the Dean, Gujarat Agriculture University. "The land is in my service and I am not in service of this land" she adds. The role of NGOs, I think, is to build alternative pro-poor and for-poor demonstration models that show that it is possible to do things deliberately differently.

It is not enough to claim the inherited land. Women must have resources to buy land, individually and collectively, as sole owner or as a joint asset. Women's right to property is a goal, not an outcome. There are so many combinations possible, we realised in the later years, in the arid areas of Banaskantha, women can not own land, for now, due to local circumstances. It would have been a long struggle lasting a decade, at least, for them to own land. By organising themselves into Pani Panchayats (Water Councils) of SEWA, now they own water, source or its supply, which has in effect, to an increasing degree, made the women joint owners of the land. Not many may have thought in those early years that land can be owned through water. Therefore, water is another productive asset, we realised that in the later years. The women strive to own and control the misuse of water. Control of water in the hands of women, as said, is changing most power equations in rural life. It is also changing ecological equation. The NGOs, in many circumstances, I suggest, can take up building mundane mechanisms which when operational are capable of changing power balance.

www.sewa.org

Social Security as an entitlement of every worker of the Formal and Informal Sector of the economy was not an issue or priority in those early years. In 1965, the Life Insurance Corporation of India gave a written response to our query, saying, "women are not a profitable proposition"! But times change. Today our 2,50,000 members are covered under one group insurance policy. One only has

to imagine the battle from early to later years. Most men may give up this battle, I think, or ruthlessly push aside what comes in their way, but the SEWA women, like most women, persisted, tried again and again. Women live day-to-day life more deliberately. They do not fight war but win day-to-day battle. The impact of their victory is far more sustained than of those wars. The NGOs may not worry to leave landmark of success that stand up and stand out but I suggest that like our women they try to create an ocean of small alternatives that spread all around.

And all these victories and much more to be won through organised collective strength of the women. How academic this division is between movements and organisations! Movements do not achieve the results if they do not create a network or alliance of organisations on the way, and organisation do not grow and have impact if they are not part of a movement. In fact, in my humble opinion, movements strive to create organisations and organisations strive to create movements. This effect creates the inevitable tensions that take the society ahead. Women must deal with this tension creatively and originally, rooted in experience and not in a readymade framework, especially in India where, in my experience, the gray band between the black and white is far greater, varied, and inventive. So now I can question the word that I have used because it was given to me by the organisers of this evening: NGO.

I suggest two things, let us not use the word NGO but use the word that represents the organisation: a trust, an association, a network, a society, a foundation, a union a not-for-profit company, and what now. Therefore, SEWA is not an NGO but it is a union. SEWA Bank is not an NGO but a co-operative Bank. SEWA Academy is not an NGO but an institution of building competence among the poor women to achieve and retain the Second Freedom. Let me suggest the second idea. Whatever these organisations are called, they must be part of a wider social change movement and social change movements must create and carry such organization with them. When this happens, the synergy changes the social reality. In saying so I may have disappointed a range of students of NGOs and heads of NGO units at multilateral and bilateral agencies. But how can I not say what I see?

I wish to talk about the quality of leadership. Let us look around and in. quality of leadership is neither the product of one great individual nor the result of odd

historical accidents. Rather it comes from deep bred traditions and communities that shape talented, gifted women at all levels. Without a vibrant tradition of resistance passed on to new generations, there can be no nurturing of a collective and critical consciousness – only professional and academic conscientiousness survives. This is a lesson we try to learn from America's Black struggle. This was also a concern since SEWA's inception. As Comel West says, where there is no vital community to hold up precious ethical and economic ideals, there can be no coming to a moral commitment – only personal profit or accomplishment is applauded. Without a creditable sense of women's economic and political struggle, there can be no shouldering of a contagious engagement – only cautious adjustment is undertaken. I asked Anasuyaben in those early years at TLA "Where do we find the source of women's leadership? She replied, "from our members". Women's membership based organisations are very few. The total number of the members is very low. Why? This absence is primarily a symptom of women's distance from a vibrant tradition of resistance, not only as said, of heroic and dramatic public wars but also day-to-day and domestic battles at home and at work. Reasoned and reasonable tradition of resistance is a role NGOs may play.

It is important to find out how women felt about these early years and how they coped. I estimate that those years were not wasted except that, women on their own, are generally slow, but as said, deliberate and take time to prepare themselves. Twenty-five years is not a long period in the history of a country. Those early years did not pass in suspended monotony of fear. When asked, in a life-profile writing workshop, our member Sumanben described those early decades of nation building saying, "Outside my window, the people marched in the distance on the dusty road of my village exhaling pink clouds of hope for me". How much has it changed for her and for us, today? The windows are larger and many. The marchers are not only men any more, there are some women. But the clouds are larger, dustier. The window though larger, still remain in-between. I wonder if my sisters here, in the USA, had much luck with the windows and the clouds. May be Studs Terkel is doing a book.

There has not been adequate or even sustained women's critique of 'governance'. How do we, as women, see feminist governance? I am not referring to having more civil servant women or 'gender sensitised' sahibs. I am referring to more equal, more caring, more effective, more responsive

administering of development by the government. Neither the early years nor the later years of freedom have freed my nation from the sahebshahi ever present on people's shoulders. And we as women have said or done little about it, I admit. In the USA governance has been on your national agenda even before your country was founded. In the past ten years several initiatives are taken by you to what is most recently called, reinventing government. We certainly want good governance, but we also want governance that creates Good. That is, governance that enables every person, men and more importantly women, the best that is in her. The governance that enables her to govern her own self with dignity. The Unitarian Church in Boston calls maintaining this dignity a religion. For our poor women it is politics.

In India, there are social movements that have many names: the women's movement, the environment movement, the Dalit movement, the human rights movement, the labour movement, the co-operative movement, and the wide variety of movements for better health and safety, and more equitable distribution of economic resources. Actually, they all share the same resistance to the on-going process that have led to economic stagnation, ecological crisis, and deepening deprivation, of the past and the current years after Independence. Ours at SEWA is the movement of the poor self-employed women – different name, again. Today, ours are the bread and butter issues of factory and home workers, water users, forest workers, farm workers, or street vendors to name a few. These later years are early years for them in the struggle for Second Freedom. May be enabling these groups are some roles that what we have called NGOs can play more actively in the future.

The poor women must have money in their own pockets, so they are no longer bonded against their will to the local money lenders, contractors, landlords or social structure.

The poor women must also be equipped to shed the sense of inferiority because of gender, caste, illiteracy or poverty, by building their organised strength self managed, self owned, viable economic organisations. It is the organised economic strength that helps them to exercise their political rights, resist oppressive social forces. How eagerly we women agreed to the logic of Economics, in those early years, and more damagingly to the idea that Economics can, indeed, be separated from social reality. It is only in these later

years that we have started suggesting that laws of economics operate in social reality, that society, can not be reduced to market, that social capital is the basis on which economic capital can have a stable and sustained growth. Look at American prosperity. TO me, the role of hard work is far greater than the explanations based on market forces. If I had a choice I would worry less about inflow of American capital in India than ensure that your work ethics reach our young and up coming. May be then there is a role for NGOs in no agreeing so eagerly, in maintaining voice of dissent, in finding new ways of working.

SEWA has been working to transform the traditional economy and its women into the modern economy while maintaining the traditional systems. Let me g back to ideas I said earlier in this session. Not only India, but India women, Indian poor women, are coming centre stage, and the dynamism in them comes from two sources, if SEWA members give us any indication: a powerful commitment to join the mainstream and the selective adaptation of enduring impact of values, spirituality, relations, aesthetics, and knowledge system. Carla Borden of Smithsonian Institution calls it Contemporary Tradition of India. The selective adaptation of the early years has helped Indian poor women move more rapidly into the future than ever before in India's or Women's history. I fell, even when aware of the limitations, a real sense of brief, acute, bursts of excitement.

How can I sum-up the single minded five decade journey from the early years to these later years for Second Freedom.

Only two things ere clear then, one, when 89% (now 92.7%) of the working population of the country is engaged in the informal sector, is outside the labour movement, there is no labour movement worth its name in our country. This realisation came gradually during the early sixties and seventies while working for the textile workers in their union, TLA.

Secondly, about 80% of women in India are rural, poor, illiterate or semi-literate and economically very active. So the poor women should be playing a leading role in the women's movement. This realisation came while I became an agitated witness and a lone voice within the labour union, to their fast declining number of women in textile industry. Later, the International Women's Year strengthened our efforts to check the deadline, but it was too late by then.

While working for the textile workers, the vast informal sector workers and producers were hitting our consciousness. "Are we not workers or producers? Are we not entitled to accident compensation, maternity leave, daycare, to credit facility, to land and house titles?"

The time ripened in 1972 to apply for registration of the union of the self-employed workers and producers. The Registrar would not register because these women would not fit into their definition of Trade Union. In 1985, the same Registrar registers National Centre for Labour (NCL), a national body of informal sector workers, without any questions! Times had ripened. These workers by now have established their political visibility.

I was publicly ridiculed when I talked of recognition of piece-rate home based workers as 'workers' and demanding legal protection and social security by my union to which I belonged. That was 1969, I and my Union were thrown out for raising such questions. Times change. However, in 1996 the world sees the ILO Convention on Homeworkers, passed by those very trade unions who opposed us.

I cannot forget what we saw during the tours of the National Commission on Self Employed Women in 13 states of the country. We saw, let me generalise that awareness has spread among women. Awareness of their rights being protected by 'someone somewhere' is there in the back of their minds. The new opportunities are fast catching their attention. In every group that we met, there were one or two bright, articulate, defiant young women ready to act as catalyst for a better future. As I travel in the country today, more than ever before, I see everywhere these women are ready to absorb new ideas, more assistance, even to get organised to better their future, and if time comes, to struggle. This is the most imminent challenge posed before NGO in India by these women today.

Let me go to what we discussed at a recent conference of Voluntary Action Network of India meeting in Ahmedabad. The future of voluntary action's past suggests that we move out of what has now become Voluntary Sector to the rest of the sectors of our society by pressing and promoting voluntary spirit. May be this is the forum to suggest that the future of voluntary actions' past is in spreading voluntary spirit.

Why this separation between voluntary sector, and voluntary spirit? It was useful to consolidate the gains and capabilities, individual and collective, in forming a voluntary sector that is visible and is heard, increasingly more, in national development process of India. But things have changed. How else do we understand the non-governmental organisations promoted by the government agencies and not-for-profit corporations launched by profitable corporate bodies? It is time to dispense the organised voluntary sector to move into the bastions of the State and the Capital by spreading voluntary spirit. That is, voluntary sector must transform from a sector into a way of relating, a way of linking, and way of building partnerships between the State, the Capital, and the Civil Society. That is, let me further explain, that these three relate to each other not only through the social contract of rights and responsibilities but in a voluntary spirit. This appears to me the future of voluntary sector.

But then what is this voluntary spirit? There may be various way of defining this. But three elements are most essential in such definition. First, voluntary spirit is driven by the considerations for the others. That is, we first, and without much effort, think of others and their well being before we think of us and or self interest. This consideration for others is very important. Second, that the consideration for others, when it comes in conflict without own individual self interest, we think of ways that benefit both the interests. That is, elements of mutuality and cooperation must grow. And third, most importantly, that the poor, men and women, remain in the centre of the above two elements. That is voluntary spirit is in the service of the weak. Let us work and develop these three elements again in our work and thoughts as Non Government Organisations, as Community Based Organisation (CBOs), and voluntary Organisations (VOs), or as People's Organisations (POs). You can see that these elements are not new, infact are ageold, and yet at this point in time, worth taking up as renewed objectives.

Now may I say why this separation of meaning between Voluntary Sector and Voluntary Spirit? I will cover some broad trends.

There is a rise of the virtual State, a State power that cuts across several national boundaries, political ideologies and interests, military powers, and economic territories. We see that in our villages. The state as we know is downsizing and is being replaced by the rise of the Virtual State. We do not fully know it will be like,

and what it will mean in our own life time to us. But early indications do suggest that the virtual state with voluntary spirit is more likely to be concerned with the removal of poverty than the current State with voluntary sector as part of it, we know that rather than amass land, capital, and labour, virtual state will set profit strategy and invest in people as productive workers. People with progressive and proactive voluntary spirit, as defined above, are more likely to be engaged in removing poverty in a Virtual State.

Let us look at our own past 50 years. Indian democracy has survived, with its highlights of regular elections and parliamentary procedures and its lowlights of marginalised communities and continuing poverty. In this democracy, ours is the largest and most heterogeneous voluntary sector that is known in democratic countries. Our voluntary sector is multiethnic and linguistically separated. And yet we have proved that voluntary sector is possible in deeply separated societies. But now things are changing inside and outside the sector. Some changes we are all aware of and some are yet to emerge, but it seems to me important that we transform the sector into voluntary spirit so that it is possible to build a range of grand coalitions of NGOs and PVOs and CBOs and People's Organisations and People's Movements and Social Movements working in favour of the poor; so that it is possible to maintain relative autonomy of voluntary spirit from the respective dominance of other sector; so that it is possible to merge representation with participation in our governance to support each other; and so that the minority and the disadvantaged within the society and within the voluntary sector can effectively protect their autonomy. Voluntary spirit is not a means to a higher democratic end. Voluntary spirit is not a means to a higher democratic end. Voluntary spirit is itself the highest democratic end. May be Prill Moyer has already debated this with more synthesis.

Let me add a few landmarks for the future 50 years in the end. There may be a role for NGOs. First, it is not enough to put the poor in the centre of voluntary spirit but that we will have to also think about voluntary poverty that Gandhiji recommended in the past. This means changing the way we live and how we live. This also means changing the reasons for why we live. Do we live to consume or we live to create? Our life is increasingly reflecting that of the earthworm. Things consumed from one end come out as garbage. The role of voluntary poverty is becoming crucial from economic and ecological reasons. This is not new to your country, I think, from what I know of the vision of the

Hendry David Thoreau or the way of living of who then were called Boston Brahmins: for what they were after was truth, and no happiness, and they valued duty far higher than enjoyment.

Second, we also need to strive for finding ways of moving gender issues on agenda. Reservations in Panchayats and Parliament is one way, and not enough. We must work for a day when the men will give up their power not only because women demand or exercise their rights effectively, but because men find it worth sharing. I am suggesting what Gloria Stienem called "revolution within" not only for the women but for the men as well.

Third accountability of our voluntary work must be worked out, not only as a code-of-conduct or binding rules, but voluntary accountability to the society. This includes voluntary or public interest work done by the private corporations or businesses. I am trying to suggest what Robert B. Reich calls "neither zero sum nationalism nor impasive cosmopolitanism but a positive economic nationalism", in which each nation's citizens, including their roles as investors and consumers, take primary responsibility for enhancing the capacities of their countrymen for full and productive lives while ensuring that these improvements do not come at other's expense. Here the overarching goal is to enhance global welfare or reduce global poverty. In other context, but is very much applicable here, Vinoba called Sarvodaya: rise of all. Difficult as it may seem, once we do this, it will spread.

Whenever they got the opportunity, the poor women I have worked with have learned to stand tall in their work organisations and in their commitment to change. If the past bears any reliable witness, we as NGOs or individuals can continue to look to these women leaders for new viable solutions to the turmoil that people of India face. We can learn from their spirit and follow their lead in our work and place. I consider this to be my apprenticeship of Second Freedom.

www.sewa.org

We knew, in those early years, what exactly we wanted from life, which was in one word, everything. We have not changed our mind.