

SEWA Women Break Free from Parent Body

A Report By Ela Bhatt, General Secretary, SEWA



Ela Bhatt

THE Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad is a trade union of women workers in the unorganized sector. It was founded in 1972 by Ela Bhatt with the patronage of Textile Labour Association (TLA), which is a very large trade union established by Gandhiji in the course of the national movement. Recently Ela Bhatt and SEWA have been expelled from TLA.

In the post-independence era, the leaders of TLA interpreted Gandhism to mean: "No strikes, no confrontations, only negotiations and peaceful co-existence of employers and labour"! In 1972, the women's wing of TLA had conducted a survey of unorganized women workers in Gujarat. These women live and work on the edge of destitution, doing the hardest, lowest-paid labour. They have no security and no protection from labour laws so they are mercilessly exploited by traders and employers. SEWA was formed with such women—junk dealers, handcart pullers, vegetable vendors, headloaders, agricultural labourers, handloom weavers and firewood collectors.

Over the years, as SEWA grew and expanded, the women came into confrontation with the municipal corporation, traders and employers, and resorted to direct action like strikes and dharnas. They also organized self-employment schemes and literacy programmes. In a unique experiment, SEWA's 13,000 members, most of them illiterate women, set up their own cooperative bank and managed it themselves.

However, TLA leaders felt increasingly threatened by the women's

advance towards self-dependence, and methods of struggle which were not only opposed to TLA policy of compromise and collaboration, but also provided a dangerous role model to the male workers! They also resented the press publicity and widespread recognition given to Ela Bhatt's work, for example her getting the Magsaysay award in 1977.

Finally, the tension came to a head during the recent anti-reservations agitation led by caste Hindus, which resulted in widespread looting, killing, burning and violent attacks on the dalit population in Gujarat state. Most of the conservative upper caste male leaders of TLA pretended to take a stand of non-interference in the agitation, but this virtually amounted to a tacit support of the upper castes, considering that Gujarat was torn by near civil war, and the dalits were waging a battle for survival. In this explosive situation, Ela Bhatt was one of the few TLA members who came out in support of dalit rights. This proved the proverbial last straw on the camel's back and Ela was expelled for "indiscipline." SEWA was thrown out of its quarters in TLA premises, and would have been on the streets, had it not been for the SEWA reception centre given them by the International Textile Garments and Leather Workers Federation of Belgium. Women's organizations need to extend solidarity and support to our sisters in SEWA.

We reprint below extracts from Ela Bhatt's open letter, which gives details of this split.

"...THE background to the separation were the strong and violent caste

agitations which erupted in Gujarat from January to April ... under the leadership of medical students who were demanding an end to reservation of seats for Harijans in all medical colleges.

Perhaps because all respectable institutions are dominated by high caste Hindus, none spoke up for the Harijans. The Harijan mill workers in TLA, many of whom suffered beating, stabbing and arson, were in fear of their lives and pressed the TLA leaders to speak up in public on their behalf, but the leaders refused, saying it was a political issue. Finally, in desperation, the Harijan mill workers (who are in the spinning department of each mill), went on a spontaneous strike and shut down the mills for three days.

Many of SEWA's members are Harijans and visiting their houses in spite of the city curfew, we could see how they were suffering. As the agitation went on for four months, all our members suffered loss of income. The markets were closed, the banks were closed, production had ceased, curfew was clamped down on various areas, so for our women, sources of employment had almost stopped.

At the end of the second month, conditions became unbearable. We could see that they had nothing to eat in the family. Our women wanted to take out a procession appealing for peace, but in the atmosphere full of violence, it was not advisable to do so. The mildest demonstration we could do was a prayer meeting of our members and pass a resolution appealing to all the sections of society to start their business, so that women could start their work and income could come into the family. This

resolution was passed under the chairmanship of Mr Shukla, the then president of SEWA. Next day the resolution appeared in the press. The TLA leadership consisting of five high caste, non-worker members known as “presidium” scolded me for passing such a resolution and sending it to the press.

Two days later, two of the top Gandhians in the country—Shri Narayan Desai and Shri Govindrao Deshpande invited me to a peace meeting which they were struggling to arrange. I promptly agreed to participate in the peace committee because peace was very precious for us. This committee included the chief minister, home minister, journalists, medical students, harijan and non-harijan leaders, mayor of the city, medical faculty heads, legislators and the like. In the meeting, I spoke and strongly appealed for peace, describing the atrocities and the atmosphere of fear in which harijans were living in the city slums and also in the villages. I also remarked that the real medical problem is ... lack of access to medical services for the villagers ... I emphatically said that the reservation policy should stay on ..This is a war between unequals. Therefore, the weak have to be protected and uplifted.

When my speech appeared in the press next day, I was harshly scolded by the leadership, telling me: “You are on the pay-roll of TLA and cannot take any stand on the reservation issue as TLA has decided to keep detached from this issue.” Our house was stoned for six nights by caste hindus, our own neighbours. The TLA leaders started making the atmosphere more and more hostile for SEWA...

I had to attend a one-day board meeting of the directors of women world banking in Rome in April. I returned within a week. I saw that the telephone service in my room was restricted, my typing service was suddenly stopped, my secretarial service already withdrawn. Somehow, the TLA leadership had not liked my going abroad, although every time I go it is to advance the work of SEWA. Similar harassment was done to me when I had to go on ILO employment mission to Afghanistan, as also when I was on the government of

India delegation to the UNESCO conference in Paris. The next week, I received a harshly worded notice, saying: “You have not improved your behaviour. Therefore you are given the following advice: 1. Because of your busy schedule, you do not look after the women’s section of TLA properly, hence you should leave TLA. 2. Take away SEWA from TLA premises. 3. Take away SEWA bank from TLA premises. 4. Remove the name of TLA from SEWA’s building.” At



the end of the notice it was mentioned that the presidium insists on your implementing this advice in two months’ time. I was shocked to receive this notice and wondered how the organization which I have served for 15 years and the leaders whom I have considered my elders could lift the pen to write to me to go away from here. I felt very disturbed.

Hearing of my dismissal, our respected elder Shri Shankarlal Banker called me and the members of the presidium to effect a reconciliation. One member of the presidium refused to come. I explained that any independent body can judge the progress of the women’s wing of TLA headed by me since 13 years. In Shri Banker’s presence,

I frankly said that I do not want to leave TLA and will accept any work they want to give me. But their hearts were not at all touched. For the sake of conciliation, I gave an apology for my foreign visit though I did not believe I had done any wrong ... But it seems they did not want me because on May 1, I received a notice saying I should take away my provident fund and gratuity and follow their advice of moving SEWA and the bank out of the TLA building ... Thus they put a stop to any conciliation.

... So in an atmosphere of uncertainty and doubt we had to move SEWA from TLA to SEWA reception centre ... The TLA leaders then called three executive meetings and passed a resolution to expel Ela Bhatt from honorary membership and sever all links with SEWA. Though I was a member of the executive committee, and they were discussing my case, they did not invite me to the three meetings in the month of May. Natural justice has been denied to me. This was followed by the resignation of Mr Shukla, president of SEWA and Mr Joshi, vice-president of SEWA bank.

... There are three main issues :

1. A big union smothering a small union. TLA is a huge giant union in Gujarat. SEWA is so tiny in comparison, but small as it is, it is the only union of the weakest section of self-employed women. When the TLA leaders were displeased with this little union, they tried to smother it, not caring for the weak section it represented. They asked their unions to withdraw their deposits from SEWA bank. In all, they withdrew deposits worth Rs 700,000 from SEWA bank within a month’s time. This was a direct action to destroy a small bank. They are also taking direct steps to smother SEWA, by influencing funding agencies against SEWA, hampering the supply of raw materials for our economic units ... The last major step they will now take is to oust SEWA from NLO affiliations. They have already withheld our funds from AAFLI since four months. They spread vicious lies and rumours about SEWA and finally NLO tried to cut down the size of SEWA by putting restrictions on our enrolling members...

2. Feudal attitudes. The TLA leaders run the union on a feudal basis. They

say TLA is a family. However, the family they have in mind is that of a feudal lord and his vassals known as *Jajmani*. The qualities demanded of the organizers are homage, loyalty, obedience and service to the leader. The organizers under this system are weak, timid and fearful. We believe an effective union organizer must be strong, courageous, forceful and dedicated to a cause, not a person. The feudal attitude of the leaders (against which we were struggling all the time) was making our organizers totally ineffective.

3. Male domination Finally, though we hate to say this, we must admit that TLA is male dominated. This is most obviously indicated by the fact that during TLA's strong period from 1950 to 1970, the number of women workers dropped from 20 per cent of the mill workforce to three per cent. Apart from the founder of TLA, Smt. Anasuyaben, there has never been a woman leader in TLA, and apart from myself, no woman has held a post higher than that of a clerk. One of the TLA leaders proudly boasts in public meetings that he does not like women and had never wanted SEWA at all.

I joined as chief of the women's wing in 1968. After ten years of struggle within the union and outside, we finally made an agreement with the mill owners that the total number of women workers which had fallen to about 3,000 must be maintained at the 1975 level. I also tried to make the women's section more active and in spite of internal resistance, the number of sewing classes went up from two to 25. Khadi and masala production units for women were also started. SEWA, started in 1972, was perhaps the most lively part of the women's wing and had been getting more and more effective. Unfortunately, as soon as SEWA started being effective, it led to the dismissal of both myself and SEWA.

... The domination is maintained by not allowing the women to assert themselves but making them always remain inferior to and in fear and awe of the TLA leader. For example, he never allowed the executive committee of women workers in SEWA to develop an effective decision-making body. Every time an executive committee meeting was held, the TLA leader would dominate, would not allow discussion of serious issues and would make the meeting into

a frivolous chat. We had often resisted this.

The organizers were treated as the whims of the leader dictated. For example, when the organizers pleaded with the leaders not to shout at them, they were accused of indiscipline, humiliated and threatened. The leader vehemently pressed for written apologies which we resisted all along...

... What an irony of fate that TLA-SEWA jointly sponsored a seminar on "Integrating Women in Trade Union Leadership" in Ahmedabad and the very next year SEWA was expelled by its parent body TLA. SEWA owes its existence to TLA, but when SEWA women slightly show their little bit of independence and self-dignity, it is being destroyed. With so much effort, we had been able to bring urban and rural self-employed women into the fold of a trade union, and now their effort is to totally throw us out of the trade union world! ... With the strength of our members, dedication of my colleagues, support of many, many friends known and unknown, and god's blessings SEWA will go ahead. SEWA will not die..." □

Not Today

*I always do the right thing
But not today.
I always do what people ask
But not today—
No!
In Nilchander valley
Where nothing grows old,
Nothing changes,
Flawless,
Starless,
Stormless,
The blood in my hot veins is
rebellious.
I want to see a storm
Passionate as my blood,
Giant hills,
Demonic stones,
I want to see the clouds
Breaking their heads
And I want to see the clouds
Fall into those gulfs,
Their limbs shattered.
I don't like pure blue sky.*

*/ always do the right thing
But not today.
I know society has a loud voice
But my purse is full
I can buy the voice.
I know religion will be outraged
But I shall bow my head for a
while
And it will be appeased.
I know something will cry in my
soul
But psychology will find me an
explanation
And keep my soul quiet.
I always do the right thing
But not today.*

—Amrita Pritam
(translated from Punjabi)

*Dear Subhaga,
While we appreciate your hesitation,
we feel that the very purpose of a
women's group or a magazine like
Manushi, is to help each one of us to*

*break our isolation which passes for
"privacy", and to bring us together.
After all, surely the purpose of your letter
too is to encourage women who are
"strangers" to each other to begin
realizing their solidarity. If we cannot
trust each other's integrity and seek each
other's support, then indeed ours is a
lost cause. That is why though we would
definitely preserve your anonymity in
print, as has been done with so many
women, (Gargi in 5th, Mona in this
issue), we do not want to begin a
tradition of anonymity between
ourselves.*

*Of course it's a difficult process to
break down the barriers but doesn't
each one of us need to make a
beginning, to take that very necessary
risk ? With other women who feel the
need as strongly ? Please do re-think
this and come over !*

*In sisterhood
Manushi*