

The principal distinguishing feature of this book is its analytical framework, namely, a neo-institutional and transaction costs framework, to analyse the dynamic Indian developmental scene. Most works on development economics tend to ignore the institutional aspect in general and transaction costs in particular. Having said this, it is equally important to bear in mind that economic development is a multi-disciplinary phenomenon and its understanding requires an eclectic approach.

In this context, sole reliance on transaction costs to the possible exclusion of others could be misleading. Nevertheless, in this case the emphasis on transaction costs could be excused as the earlier works have totally ignored this dimension. To sum up, this book is a welcome addition to the literature and will enrich our understanding of the Indian development scene. [27]

Email: nssiddharthan@gmail.com

Banking on Themselves

**We Are Poor But So Many:
The Story of Self-Employed Women
in India**

by Ela R Bhatt;
Oxford University Press, 2006;
pp 233, Rs 595.

DEEPTA CHAKRAVARTY

I hope I am not wide of the mark in calling this book an autobiography of Ela R Bhatt and also a biography of the evolution of a trade union of unorganised poor women workers in Gujarat at the same time, for they seem to me to be symbiotically linked to each other. In her own words the book is about "...our interwoven lives, about how and why we join hands and what we have done, and still do, together – our hopes, actions, struggles, successes, and failures. The women have changed my life; they have inhabited it, enriched it and shown me why life is worth living."

Historically, the concept of trade unions goes hand in hand with the large-scale and often formal industrial activities organised by men basically in the interests of the male employees. This document, on the contrary, reveals "the process that has led to the birth of a trade union of the self-employed women" doing small but essential economic activities, quite dispersed, and can in no way be brought under the definition of the "organised sector" of India. Ela Bhatt highlights the strength lying in the togetherness which can significantly change situations even without much support from broader political processes. The book describes the unionisation efforts among the poor women according to

different activities. Its rich narrative style helps the reader to sail easily through the tiny successes as well as the large failures.

Influenced by Gandhian philosophy, Ela Bhatt is often referred to as a gentle revolutionary. She was introduced to the world of the working poor by her best friend and husband, Ramesh Bhatt. As a practising lawyer, working closely with the Textile Labour Association (TLA), she had an opportunity to see how the informal economy works in order to support the basic livelihoods of formal sector workers in the context of a major strike or a lockout. The women took up all sorts of odd jobs: selling fruits and vegetables in the streets, stitching in their homes at piece rate for middlemen, working as labourers in wholesale commodity markets, loading and unloading merchandise, or collecting recyclable refuse from city streets. All these jobs are particularly outside the formal sector and are not covered by the labour laws of our country. They constitute the work of poor self-employed women whose interests became her own since then. Consequently, it was 1972 when the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) came into existence.

While SEWA started its journey under the umbrella of TLA, it did not take long for Ela Bhatt to understand that these women workers would always be of marginal importance to the TLA. "In the process of modernising the textile mills, union and industry had both agreed that women were dispensable; the mills found women to be 'expensive', whereas the TLA's attitude was that it was better for women to be homemakers and for men to earn the higher wages."

One of the first efforts of SEWA was to organise the women head-load workers

who carried bales of cloth from the wholesalers to the retailers in order to increase their wage rates. Here she found her first comrades – few in numbers though – who later turned out to be instrumental in the organisation. The prolonged effort of the members and the leadership gradually drew the attention of the working poor on one hand and the academia and larger society on the other. SEWA's membership grew steadily to make it the largest primary union in the country by 2004. There are now ten independent sister organisations of SEWA working in different states of India. It is difficult to accept that even after this success SEWA is not considered a registered trade union by the government of India. The members of this union are all self-employed in different trades. The government's blinkered vision cannot classify these women as "workers" as there is no direct employer under whom the women work. And if one is not a worker how can there be a workers' union? This is an issue of serious concern especially in the context of an emerging large informal economy with majority of women and men being self-employed.

Initially, she was open to the idea of men joining SEWA. However, the women categorically refused. Their major arguments ran like this: first, if men were permitted to join they would try to dominate. Second, "they felt that the issues that were important to women were different from those important to men". Incidentally, academic research in different parts of the world including India confirms this view.

Beginning the Struggle

The first chapter takes us through telling descriptions about these poor women's living and working conditions in the city slums and villages. The author points out that "to be poor is to be vulnerable. The condition of being poor, of being self-employed, and of being a woman are all distinct yet interrelated states of vulnerability". The next three chapters describe the experiences of organising the urban poor of rag pickers, garment stitchers and the vendors. Although the experiences of exploitation of the women unorganised workers brought out in this book are basically local, they probably have a universal validity as well. This sounds convincing as the logic of the market is not much different all over the world. The tremendous determination and capabilities of poor women in dealing with employers,

middlemen and labour bureaucracy at every step amaze the reader. It shatters the stereotypes of not only the "poor" but also "docile oriental women".

These chapters also introduce us to the efforts of cooperative formation among the urban poor based on different trade groups and its impact on sustainable development. Today SEWA has a number of viable trade cooperatives. However, it all started with a major failure when SEWA tried to set up a cooperative for the rag pickers that would function like a dealership. The objective was to bypass the middleman and construct a godown to store and grade the waste better so that the women could get a better price. But, it was a revealing experience for SEWA to realise the importance of disciplined teamwork in planning, maintaining checks and balances, fair distribution and so on.

Though SEWA started its activities among the urban poor, over the years it started organising the rural poor even from the dry deserts of Gujarat. Today, in fact, rural members are significantly much higher compared to their urban sisters. The chapters on embroiders, gram haat and sukhi tell us about SEWA's effort to be with the suffering working women in rural Gujarat including the dalits and tribals. SEWA's emphasis, most probably drawn from Ela Bhatt's experience in Israel, on trade cooperatives helped the rural women to form producers' groups in order to build and own assets. This has also enhanced the capacity of the self-employed women ranging from the embroiders working in their homes to the gum pickers of deep forests, to face the competitive market firmly.

SEWA members, since the beginning had a need for their own financial services. The commercial banks, though nationalised in 1969 with an aim to serve the poor, did not have any faith in the poor women's capacity to pay back the loan as they usually do not have any collateral to offer. Moreover, day-to-day tiny transactions by the poor women workers were also not quite encouraged. On top of it, the overwhelming illiteracy of these women was a significant barrier to any sort of formal banking. SEWA was trying to mediate without much success. In 1974, Ela Bhatt and her SEWA thus approached a cooperative bank basically on the strength of the fact that though the sisters were poor they were so many. The bank shares were Rs 10 each. In six months, SEWA was successful in building an initial share capital of around Rs 71,000 collected from a little more than

six thousand member-workers. Even after crossing the hurdle of capital, it wasn't easy for SEWA to get registration as a cooperative bank from the government because of bureaucratic insensitivity.

Destroying Prejudices

However, once the registration was done the myth that the poor are not bankable was ultimately dismantled by the women, reminding us of the Grameen Bank's experience in Bangladesh. The bank organises regular training and counselling sessions in integrated financial planning to meet women's needs over a life cycle. In order to motivate the poor women to save, it was pointed out that no amount was too small to deposit. It was also stressed that whenever one visited the bank she should put at least a little amount into her account.

Ela Bhatt argues that it is the consistent contact with clients that makes the credibility and success of the bank. Before sanctioning a loan the bank collects information about irregularity of income and unpaid debt instalments and also about the whiteness of teeth to eliminate the symptom of tobacco addiction, indicating a sign of a regular additional expense. Most interestingly, presence of all these evils does not thwart the process of loan sanctioned to a particular client. It only serves the purpose of detecting the areas of potential trouble where supplementary support needs to be provided to make the woman credit-worthy. This is indeed a unique approach to the problem. Thus in this case the bank loan not only serves the purpose of instantaneous help but most probably would have a long-term effect as well. However, while taking us through the narratives of a few clients in order to explain the function of the SEWA Bank, she appropriately points out that microcredit alone can never be a sustainable solution to the problems of the poor.

Sickness is a recurring crisis in the lives of poor women. They are vulnerable to disease as a consequence of malnutrition and bad living and working conditions. In 1977, SEWA found that among 500 women who availed the loan only 20 defaulted. Interestingly, they "defaulted" because they were not alive. She probed into the matter and found that 15 out of these 20 died of childbirth. This came as a revelation to her. Initially SEWA tried to tap the existing government medical facilities in order to help their members. However, it failed altogether basically because of the attitude of the medical staff at the government hospitals

even though it was quite accessible to the poor economically. The typical middleclass mindset of the doctors failed to understand the real need of the poor women. It was found that during pregnancy, almost 70 per cent of poor women still turned to the 'dai' (midwife) for help and advice. SEWA took a keen interest in the role of the dai.

It was decided to emphasise primarily on training the local dais who could take care of 80 per cent of the day-to-day illness and health problems of women and children. SEWA arranged a thorough, though, unconventional training for these self-employed women with the help of a medical doctor and a team of medical interns. The training process consisted of a pattern of exchange between the wide practical experiences of the dais and the essential theoretical knowledge of the doctors. These women developed a large team of health workers in the rural districts.

However, basically being a trade union, it is not possible for SEWA to organise these health activities within its structure. In 1984, SEWA therefore launched a health cooperative with the professional touch of a trained public health person. Unfortunately, it took another not less than six years for SEWA to get a registration for this cooperative from the government because the cooperative was constituted not by qualified doctors but by the poor midwives. As new professionals, the dais are encouraged to charge fees for their services according to the economic status of the patient. Ironically enough, as Ela Bhatt notes, "In the government's revised Reproductive and Child Health Policy, the role of the dai is missing. The policy envisions that 80 per cent of the births will occur at an institution... How the formal health system of clinics and nurses will actually reach the people is still unclear." Even today there are lakhs of villages in our country which are hours away from the nearest primary healthcare institution.

To conclude, one can only say that this book is an indispensable document "for all policy-makers who have anything to do with" India in particular and the developing countries in general. Apart from its overwhelming importance for the policy issues, academic discourse, which often tries to locate women's agency – though with misplaced emphasis – in the poor developing nations, can also benefit a lot from the rich descriptive analytics of this book. **EPW**

Email: deepita@iimk.ac.in