

Ela Bhatt's SEWA: A Vision for Women's Empowerment

Why in news?

Elaben Bhatt, noted Gandhian, leading women's empowerment activist, and renowned founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has passed away.

Who is Ela Bhatt?

- Elaben was born on September 7, 1933, in Ahmedabad, in a family that engaged in social causes.
- In 1972, she founded SEWA, one of the largest cooperatives working for women.
- She was a Member of the Rajya Sabha and of the Planning Commission of India in the 1980s.
- Ela Bhatt was a co-founder and had served as Chairperson of Women's World Banking.
- She also served as an advisor to the World Bank, and addressed the United Nations General Assembly.
- She became the part of a group of world leaders called the Elders, founded by Nelson Mandela to promote human rights and peace across the world.
- Elaben was the Chairperson of Sabarmati Ashram and recently resigned as the Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi-founded Gujarat Vidhyapith.
- She was the recipient of national and international awards, including the Padma Bhushan, the Ramon Magsaysay Award and the Indira Gandhi Peace Prize.

"It is the women who are the leaders in change and without their participation poverty can never be removed"



What is SEWA?

- SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) is the single largest Central trade union registered in 1972 with a base of over 2.1 million members from India and in neighbouring nations.
- It grew out of the Textile Labour Association (TLA) — founded by Anasuya Sarabhai and Mahatma Gandhi in 1920.
- **Principle** - The poor do not need charity, they need an enabling mechanism to come out of the vicious circle of poverty and vulnerability.
- It incorporates Gandhian principles of Satya (truth), Ahimsa (non-violence), Sarvadharm (integrating all faiths, all people) and Khadi (local employment and self-reliance).

- **Twin goals**

1. **Full employment** – Achieve work security, food security and social security
 2. **Self-reliance** – At individual and community levels in terms of economic as well as decision making abilities.
- With an annual membership fee of Rs 10, SEWA allows anyone (women) who is self-employed to become a member.

What is so significant about SEWA?

- **Women empowerment** - It has helped rehabilitate women in personal, and even political or social crises, by empowering them through skilling and training.
- Women from diverse social and community backgrounds work together in the organisation.
- **Women employment** - It provided employment to women and promoted cooperative production, consumption and marketing of textiles which constituted the core of India's industrialisation.
- **Labour movement** - It also decisively influenced the course of trade unionism and labour movement in India.
- **Microfinance** - In 1974, SEWA Bank was established to provide small loans to poor women which was recognised by the International Labour Organisation as a microfinance movement.
- **Influence in policy making** - The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act (2008), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (2011), and Street Vendors Act (2014) are seen as successes of SEWA's struggle.
- The PM Street Vendors Atmanirbhar Nidhi ([PM-SVANidhi](#)) scheme is seen as being inspired by SEWA's microfinance model.

What are the major initiatives of SEWA?

- **Hansiba** - SEWA launched a clothing line called Hansiba, which has collaborated with international designers to take the ethnic embroidery of Gujarat to the world, through its own women.
- **Anubandh** - During the pandemic, SEWA launched Anubandh, an e-commerce platform to connect sellers with buyers.
- **Digital Beti** - Started by SEWA Bharat in 2019 and funded by Facebook, Digital Beti aims to overcome the digital gender gap in India by training women from rural areas to become entrepreneurs.
- In Ahmedabad SEWA runs a cafe that serves affordable hot Gujarati and South Indian meals, sells vegetables grown in its farms, pulses, and spices.

References

1. [The Indian Express | The story of Ela Bhatt's SEWA](#)
2. [The Hindu | Elaben Bhatt, Gandhian, SEWA founder, and women's empowerment activist, dies](#)
3. [The Hindu | SEWA pioneered by Elaben Bhatt was an innovative experiment](#)

4. [SEWA|About Self Employed Women's Association](#)

