

**Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development (2011)**  
*New Delhi, 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2013*

Honourable Rashtrapatiji,  
Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singhji,  
Smt. Ela Ramesh Bhatt and sisters from SEWA,  
Distinguished guests

I welcome you warmly to this ceremony where a prize commemorating one of India's most remarkable women is being conferred on another remarkable woman who has touched and changed millions of lives. Indira Gandhi's concern for the poor is well known. Inspired by Gandhiji's example and philosophy, Smt. Bhatt has dedicated her life to the cause of uplifting the most poor, most vulnerable and most marginalized working women. Like a sunbeam of light that falls into a dark room and holds its ground, she has illuminated and dispelled the darkness in their lives, bringing them hope and new possibility. She has helped them to transcend their circumstances and step on to the ladder of economic opportunity. India's civil society has produced many great organizations. Few have been as potent and as far reaching in their impact as SEWA. Elaben has been SEWA's beating heart for forty years. We salute her achievements and welcome her in our midst today.

Indira Gandhi prized courage above all other qualities: physical courage of course, but moral courage even more, the courage of conviction, the courage to swim against the tide, and to do what we believe is right. Elaben personifies these qualities. She has focused her mind not just on a vision, but on how to actually make things happen, so that wasted human potential can be realised. Her great insight has been in the power of collective action, of group effort achieving what individual action cannot. In a feat of organisation that few thought possible, SEWA has brought together impoverished women of more than one hundred diverse trades and occupations to seek freedom from poverty and exploitation. Elaben has displayed that most unusual of gifts, the capacity to enter into their minds and let them enter hers. Not the least of her achievements is the way all SEWA's members have internalized

the values of non-violence, communal harmony, respect for nature, self reliance, and co-operation rather than competition.

SEWA's footprint now extends to ten of our states and to Afghanistan. It has inspired others as far afield as Africa and Latin America. SEWA's full promise, however, has yet to be realized. We often forget the immensity of India's informal sector which embraces more than ninety percent of our work force. Within it are millions of people engaged in thousands of small occupations, requiring no significant capital investment, only resourcefulness and initiative. We need many more organizations like SEWA, many more Ela Bhatt's to help organise these millions so that they too can gain access to credit, acquire skills and confidence and position themselves better in the marketplace. SEWA's great lesson is that the best help for the poor is help for self-help.

In recent weeks, issues of gender justice and gender equality have loomed large in our minds. From the very start Elaben has rightly seen women as the true nurturers of society and the bedrock of social progress. Invest in women. Rely on women's leadership. Put women at the centre of economic planning and development. Give women voice. These have been Elaben's watchwords. She has been ahead of her time. We know from hard experience that women's involvement in development programmes makes all the difference between success and failure. Gender equity is also the key to a more prosperous economy.

Indira Gandhi often posed questions about India's development trajectory and the values which should guide it. Ridding India of poverty was paramount but where, she asked, should the line of material satisfaction be drawn? Should we blindly imitate the affluent societies of the West, and accept the inevitability of standards of living based on waste? Should progress be synonymous with an assault on nature? She asked us to think of an alternative path of development more in tune with India's circumstances and its civilizational values.

Elaben has articulated such an alternative. She has described poverty as the moral failure of society and its mass persistence so long after independence as an indictment of our whole approach to development. Perhaps wealth and want will always co-exist, but can wealth that is built on want be justified? Is life only about producing and consuming ever more and more? As a new starting point she has proposed what she describes as the 'hundred mile principle': that we should meet our basic needs of food, clothing, housing, primary education and healthcare, as well as access to capital, from within a radius of a hundred miles. By doing so we will energize local skills and productive capacities, and provide employment to all.

Elaben's proposal does not arise from any dry economic theory. It is concerned with repairing the social fabric, with making the poor true partners in development, with giving preference to the local against the global. Implicit in it is the more fundamental question of how society should live, and how much and in what way it should produce and consume. It is a challenge to Davos man. It is also a challenge to each one of us to think afresh about our common future.

Thank you, Elaben, for all that you have done.

# Women, Work and Peace<sup>1</sup>

- Ela R. Bhatt<sup>2</sup>

Honourable President of India, Honourable Smt. Sonia Gandhi, Honourable Prime Minister of India, and, distinguished dignitaries and friends,

Thank you for this singular honour. I humbly accept the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development on behalf of the self-employed women of SEWA. This year SEWA is 40 years old, I turn 80. We are a sisterhood of 17 lakh. Our journey is long and perhaps endless.

This Prize has given honour to all working poor women and their leadership worldwide, who hold peace, disarm violence and reduce poverty with their honest work. And therefore it gives me deep content to be here today. I still hope some day they will hold central place in our economy.

This Peace Prize gives us an opportunity to reexamine our ideas of what constitutes peace. Certainly, absence of war is not Peace. Peace is what keeps war away but it is more than that; Peace disarms and renders war useless. Peace is a condition enjoyed by a fair and fertile society. Peace is about restoring balance in society; only then is it lasting peace. In my view, restoration and reconstruction of a society are essential and key components of the peace process worldwide.

If we look carefully at our world, we find that where there is unfair distribution of resources, there is unrest. When people cannot enjoy the fruits of their labours fairly, when they are forced off their land and homestead and forest, we have the basis of an unjust society. Where there is violence and conflict, we invariably find poverty. And where there is poverty, we find anger and acute struggles for justice and equity. And, we see Governments resorting to repression for ensuring 'law and order'.

I have often stated that Poverty is violence. This violence is by consensus of society that lets other human beings go without *roti* and *kapada* and *makan*. Poverty is not God given. It is a moral collapse of our society. Poverty strips a person of his or her humanity, and takes away freedom. Poverty is day-to-day violence, no less destructive than war. Poverty is lack of peace and freedom. In fact, removing poverty is essentially building peace. I know I am not saying anything new. *Garibi Hatao* to me also meant, indeed, *Shanti Banao*. *Garibi Hatao* is a peace song.

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<sup>1</sup> Acceptance speech at the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Delhi, dt. 18/2/13.

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In India, we are proud of our multicultural society. *Bahudha* is at the heart of what makes us who we are: social diversity, political diversity, religious diversity, biological diversity. But in our rush to modernize, let us not forget one of our greatest assets, our economic diversity. In our markets, we have the street vendor, the cart seller, the kiosk owner, the shop owner, and the supermarket owner, all plying their trades at the same time. Let them cater to different strata of society, co-existing and competing in a natural, organic way. Let our planning include ample room for the millions of small entrepreneurs and self-employed who cater to the widest strata of society to flourish and grow. They are the agents of an economic development that reaches the grassroots; they weave the living web of social and economic relationships that will bind our nations together.

Gandhiji talked about Swaraj; he talked about economic decentralization. I would urge us to ensure that six basic, primary needs are met from resources within 100 miles around us. I call it the 100 mile principle. If food, shelter, clothing, primary education, primary healthcare and primary banking are locally produced and consumed, we will have the growth of a new holistic economy, that the world will sit up and take notice. And it is possible in and around India - in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan - women have done it. Catching up with the western economic models will turn us into incompetent followers, not leaders. But if we address the realities of our own countries, we can create a Development that makes us leaders of our destiny. Let me make clear, however, that the 100 Mile Principle is not a recipe for isolation. I am not asking at all of going back but to move forward with heightened awareness about how and where we spend our money and what our work is doing to us and those around us. In fact technologies can help to share knowledge and ideas across the countries.

However, we do need to get away from a world where people grow what they do not eat, and eat what they do not grow; where they have lost control over their basic production and daily consumption; where they have become part of a system whose outcomes are determined by people far away in a manner not in their interest nor control. This awareness is already growing among the younger generation the world over. In India, we have a running start, because our local economies are still alive. Let us give them the respect they deserve by investing in people who survive despite our neglect.

And where do we start? I have faith in women. Women have shown, if we care to observe, that disarmament in the end is not a treaty by two nations to render arms useless, though such a treaty is much needed in this world. In my experience, and I have seen within India and in other countries, women are the key to rebuilding a community. Why? Focus on women, and you will find an ally who wants a stable community. She wants roots for her family. You get a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator, a networker, a forger of bonds. I consider thousands of poor working women's participation and representation an integral part of the peace and development process. Women bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the table.

Also, in my experience, productive work is the thread that weaves a society together. When you have work, you have an incentive to maintain a stable society. You can not only see the future, but you can plan for the future. You can build assets, and invest in the next generation. Life is no longer just about survival. Work builds peace, because work gives

people roots as well as allows them to flower; it builds communities and it gives meaning and dignity to one's life. Work restores man's relationships with himself, with fellow human beings, with the earth and the environment and with the great spirit that created us all.

Being one of The Elder, I listen to Nelson Mandela, dear Madiba, telling us frequently that "money won't create success, but the freedom to make it, will."

True, in Gaza, the men and women said to me, "Without work we can neither forgive nor forget, because what have we to look forward to?" In Sudanese camp, I heard refugees crying for work, not charity. After the earthquake in Kutch, when I visited the area, everywhere I went, the women, who had lost every thing, said to me, "*Ben*, have you brought work?"

By work, I do not mean sweatshops and cheap labour in factories that leave a person a slave to yet another kind of exploitation. Treating land and forests and people and even work as a commodity can not build a fuller human being, nor holistic society. Such work strips them of the multifunctional, multicultural character of work that fosters a dynamic and organic growth in society. A woman who tends a small plot of land, grows vegetables, weaves cloth, and provides for the family and the market, while caring for the financial, social, educational and emotional needs of her family is multifunctional worker and the builder of a stable society. One who labours long hours at a factory where he has no control of his work or his skills, contributes one product to society whose work is 'measured' and therefore given greater credence by us, while her work is unaccounted and ignored. It is the GDP at the household level that matters. The use of word 'domestic' in GDP should not be overlooked. Peace and Development cannot be measured in numbers.

I do hope that one day Peace and Development will shine on the face of our land and the people, and the world will enjoy the wisdom of my India.

Thank you very much.