

Our View of Development¹

- Ela R. Bhatt²

Thank you for the opportunity to be amongst you, share our view on development. I cannot claim to have read or studied Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, nor claim to be his follower. It is the atmosphere in which I grew up that made me.

I grew up between those years when India was fighting for freedom movement and becoming an independent nation. As youths, we were to rebuild the nation, to reconstruct our lives so that every Indian is able to enjoy the freedom. As youths, we had no confusion in our minds. Gandhiji had shown us the way. His life itself was a clear message to us.

He had thought and practised every small details of building a nation and its people. He would think of individual cleanliness on the same level as political freedom. To him, clean lavatories or the village ponds, was as vital as spiritual salvation. He has been a constant source of guidance for me in my life and my work.

He had realized that the people of India had lost their political freedom and economic freedom as well. He saw the country's economy from the perspective of the masses.

His economic thought has four fundamental principles. One, simplicity. The idea that adding complexities is not progress. Human mind is a restless bird, the more it gets, the more it wants. His second principle is non-violence- that violence in any form cannot lead to lasting peace or reconstruction. True democracy and real growth are conceivable only in non-violent society. Violence is inconsistent with freedom. His third principle is dignity of labour, sanctity of labour. For him, labour was the law of nature, and its violation, the central cause of the present economic muddle. The fourth principle is human values- nothing that compromises a person's humanity is acceptable....On these four cornerstones of simplicity, non-violence, sanctity of labour and human values – that Gandhiji builds his ideal economy.

Because the human being is central in his overall thinking on Development, the view of Development has been holistic and integrated. Development of individual in all aspects: physical, mental, spiritual, economic. Development of family unit. Development of community: local, global, water, land, culture, religion. Development of environment that is harmony with nature, respect for plant life, animal life keeping the balance – all these aspects are totally inter-related and interdependent.

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How do we co-relate each of our activity with the impact on our self, our society and this universe. The three are not separate. That is the relevance of happiness.

Gandhiji put work as central to the man's life: 'karma' as Bhagad Gita says, "If one eats fruits of the earth rendering no gift of toil to the kindly Heaven, that thief steals from this world." In other words, one who eats without putting in work is a thief..... It is the work, productive work that leads to Development and Growth. As we have seen while working with poor women, that work gives meaning to their life. Work forges an individual's identity. The work provides livelihoods that produce goods and services, and thus builds a society.

But poverty breaks down the balance. We see exploitation at every stage: of the individual, of the community and the environment.

In poverty, we assume discrimination at every stage either based on class, caste, colour, religion, gender, language. Divide and rule is the underlying motivation. We can assume intimidation at every stage—intimidation and fear in the community, in the family, in the work and environment. We assume hierarchical institutions: one thriving at the cost of other, one dominating over others in society as well as in individual relations.

Consequently, we have vulnerability of all kinds: economic, social, psychological, spiritual. People lose their faith, or they cling to misguided faith.

Gandhi's message of non-violence was a message of non-violence. It was a message against poverty. Poverty is violence against individuals, society and nature. Poverty and loss of freedom are not separate.

Gandhiji had seen, in women a breakthrough. He had faith in women's leadership in bringing transformation in the society.

At SEWA, we work with women because they are the most vulnerable, today.

We meet on the basis of work and create networks. We build unions to meet our work needs, to stop economic exploitation by traders, contractor, our governments, the global community and the 'system' and 'structures'. In SEWA, we have come together to build a Bank to meet our financial needs – to save, to borrow, to loan, to build assets, to tap resources, to improve the material quality of life. We have come together to build cooperatives to get integrated into the production process of our country. We build a social security network for our maternity needs, health and life insurance. We have been trying to forge bridges to local and global markets through a trade facilitation network of women farmers and crafts across the world. We create schools to build our capacities to manage our affairs and make an impact in the world outside.

For the people, development is not a project. It is not institutions. It is not even economics. It is about restoring balance. It is about the well-being of the poor woman, her

family, her community and her work environment and this world we all live in.. This we have learnt from Gandhiji.

Gandhi has not failed us, it is we who have failed to him. Can truth or non-violence ever fail or be irrelevant?!

The spirit of Gandhi is in his understanding of indigenous institutions that could be small, democratic and dynamic. It was not glorifying poverty. But, unfortunately, the Indian leaders who came in power after Independence, hardly understood that.

It certainly, now is the time to rethink on development where I make you happy and I become happy!

Thank you.