

Our View of Development

*Ela Ramesh Bhatt**

I want to thank for the opportunity of being amongst you and to share our views on development. I cannot claim to have read or studied Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, nor can I 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 and becoming an independent nation. As young people, we were to rebuild the nation, to reconstruct our lives so that every Indian would be able to enjoy the freedom. As young people, 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 village ponds were as vital as spiritual salvation. He has been a constant source of guidance for me in my life and my work.

He 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. First is simplicity. The idea of adding complexities is not progress. The 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 a non-violent society. Violence is inconsistent with freedom. His third principle is the dignity of labour, the sanctity of labour. For him, labour was the law of nature, and its violation was 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 - Gandhiji built his ideal economy.

Because the human being is central in his overall thinking on Development, Gandhiji's view of Development was holistic and integrated. This means development of the individual in all aspects:

* An Indian lawyer and the founder of India's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Dr. Bhatt is a respected leader of the international labour, cooperative, women, and micro-finance movements who has won several national and international awards, including Padma Bhushan.

physical, mental, spiritual, economic; development of the family unit; development of the community: local, global, water, land, culture, religion; development of the environment, which is harmony with nature, respect for plant life, animal life, keeping the balance – all these aspects are totally inter-related and interdependent.

How do we correlate each of our activities with the impact on our self, our society and this universe? The three are not separate. That is the relevance of happiness.

Gandhiji made work central to the man's life; 'karma' as Bhagavad Gita says, means "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 working is a thief. It is work, productive work, that leads to Development and Growth. As we have seen while working with poor women, work gives meaning to their lives. Work forges an individual's identity. Work provides livelihoods that produce goods and services, and thus it builds a society.

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

In poverty, we assume discrimination at every stage, based either on class, caste, colour, religion, gender, or 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 work and in the environment. We assume hierarchical institutions: one thriving at the cost of the other, one dominating over others in society as well as in individual relations.

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

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

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

At SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) 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, contractors, 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 become 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 have an impact on 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 about this world we all live in. This we have learnt from Gandhiji.

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

The spirit of Gandhi is in his understanding of indigenous institutions that can be small, democratic, and dynamic. He never glorified poverty. But, unfortunately, the Indian leaders who came to power after independence hardly understood that.

It is certainly now the time to rethink Development, a process in which I make you happy and I become happy!
