

Gandhi is with Us¹ **building an economy of Nurturance**

- Ela R. Bhatt²

Although we are gathered here today on the occasion of the Gandhi week, I must clarify that I am neither a scholar of Gandhi nor an ardent devotee. But I grew up during an era when we breathed in Gandhi's ideas and ideals, quite naturally and effortlessly. At home, in college and among friends and peer groups, we learnt about his ideas of Swaraj. We all read and understood his amazing little book, **Hind Swaraj**. That has appealed to me most, his idea that until every Indian is able to enjoy freedom, the Swaraj or Independence is incomplete. While growing up, we learnt the four principal pillars of his thoughts viz. Simplicity, Non-violence, Dignity of Labour and Human values. We were guided to build India's Swaraj on these four pillars. My faith in them has continuously deepened as I work with poor, women self-employed. Therefore, if I sum up my life in words, it would be women, work and peace.

As early as 1908, more than a hundred years ago, in his book Hind Swaraj Gandhiji, had questioned the direction in which western civilization was heading, that is, towards greater violence, greater inequities and an economy based on erosion of natural resources was 'evil' and "self destructive". He said that real progress was the mode of conduct that leads man to the path of his duty.

Today, all across the world, **progress** is measured as growth in GDP, and modern science, production systems and lifestyles. But though this has improved food production and health standards and increased the standard of living; it has also caused damage to the environment, pollution, global warming and greater inequality.

The existing 'Development' is largely based on mostly non renewable energy and is capital intensive. Agriculture today is dominated by monocrop, cash crop and new varieties requiring fertilizers and pesticides. Farming has become largely agri business and maximization of profit is the goal. This is not an economy that nurtures people and nature. For doing that, we must grow healthy food and sell in local markets. At least, the basic needs of the staple diet like cereals, vegetables, fruits, milk, must be produced and consumed locally. In this way, the primary needs of food will be accessible and affordable and healthy.

The economic, social and political systems should move for building better relationships and building collective strength. I plead for building such **an economy of nurturance** in our country. Before we move ahead, let me first explain what I mean by nurturance.

Nurturance comes naturally to human beings. I may suggest, exploitation is a learnt behaviour. None of us would be here if we were not nurtured in our infancy and childhood. Yet today the

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world encourages us to be exploitative rather than be nurturing. The result is before us in a threefold crisis – rising poverty despite abundance; rise of intolerance, hatred and violence; and environmental catastrophe – the very scenario that Gandhiji had predicted.

This has to be corrected, not by our “leaders” but by us, the common people, as a local-global movement. We need to build a (new) social economy of nurturance and reject the current anti-social economy of exploitation, destruction. In this we have to use all our resources we have in abundance, our human and social capital and reclaim our access to natural and physical capital. Finance is the instrument of growth but today finance has become an independent structure which often exists for its own sake, it has become detached from the real and material world. Money is a tool for making more money. But we must beware of the danger of the tool being used for destructive growth. Tools much serve us, not the other way. We need to ask how finance can promote nurturing growth.

Let us look at the state of **Kerala**, hailed for its high literacy. But Nalini Naik of SEWA in Kerala calls it a paradox. How? On one hand the state has been able to provide health and education to its people at very low cost, on the other hand, Kerala produces almost no food. Instead it produces cash crops like rubber, tea and spices. Rich farmers cut down the forests to plant rubber. As forests disappear, the river waters dwindle, despite the heavy monsoon for half the year. From 44 rivers just four decades ago, there are only 5 that flow through the year. Reduced forest cover reduces the capacity of soil to retain water. Rain water drains into the sea, leaving the rivers and land dry. Water is scarce and now people have to buy drums of water even for washing and bathing. Small farmers and artisans are reduced to wage labourers on rubber plantations while rubber farmers have increased economic and often political power. Almost all the food that the people of Kerala eat comes from outside the state. I am reminded of the words of farmers of Ghana at the Tallberg in Sweden that always haunt me. The farmers said to me five years ago, “What we produce we do not eat, what we eat we do not produce.” Now the same situation is happening in my country too?! These farmers had poultry farms and grew tomatoes. Now they buy frozen chicken and tins of tomato puree from super markets. On their land they grow sericulture, all for exports.

Is this is the path of growth that we choose of follow? If not, what option do we have? My suggestion is the economy of nurturance inculcated through Anubandh.

Anubandh is the bond that connects us to other human beings as well as to the animate and inanimate world. Because I am not alone in this world, you are bound to me and I am to you. Together, we form the world. Like oceanic circles, or the rooting branches of the great banyan tree, we are all bound to each other and to the land. This give and take ties us together in a net of mutuality which I call ‘anubandh’. The world is sustained by the sum of all our correlated actions. Building an economy of nurturance requires major changes in the way we think, the way we behave, the way we relate to each other and to Nature. Economics will have to be reengineered as a discipline.

Let me now focus on **finance** since it is a major milestone for building an economy of nurturance. Access to finance and financial services is the gateway to economic progress for an individual or a household. Those who were hitherto excluded will have to be given access to finance through bank accounts, operable from cash-in, cash-out points within walking distance. That means intensive financial education. We realize that new policies will have to be introduced where economic activities of nurturance like water conservation, solar energy, local organic farming, environment friendly innovations will become 'priority sector advances' by the Banks. I call them milestones because this is what I have learnt and concluded mainly from my SEWA sisters all these years.

SEWA sisters have built over 100 cooperatives aimed at getting 'full employment' at household level. By full employment we mean employment that ensures food, and income security as well as social security that includes healthcare, childcare, insurance pension. They have been the financial products designed by SEWA Bank in its first decade. In our experience, secondly, no solution was effective in isolation. For example when we set out to enhance the embroidery skills of women in Banaskantha, we had to first solve the water problem as they spent half the day in fetching water. Their economic and social conditions improved by building collective strength and becoming self-reliant. I call it path of Swaraj, સ્વરાજપથ the self rule that Gandhi mentioned in Hind Swaraj.

To most people, the picture of poverty is associated with having no food, clothes or shelter. But, when we began SEWA, I found that most of our sisters were deeply in debt, paying very high interest on their borrowing that eroded their earnings. Therefore to the basic needs of food clothing shelter, health education, I have added the availability of finance i.e. banking since its inception (1974).

Amongst poor families, all women work although what they do may not fit within your definition of 'WORK'. For me, it was not acceptable. Despite these self employed women being economically active, contributing to the national income and GDP, they were not counted as 'workers' or 'producers', 'entrepreneurs' or even 'farmers'. They were invisible, unrecorded, unprotected. These women were organized into a trade union viz SEWA (1972) and further organized into SEWA cooperative bank in 1974 to enable them to access financial services.

Although SEWA is a 1.5 million strong Trade Union with SEWA bank and microFinance has become a buzzword now, the struggle and stories of how they contribute to the national income and how they are a part of steps moving towards the **path of nurturing economy**, led by women have not been recognized, seriously. Let me tell you some short, short stories of SEWA sisters in the rural and urban areas and the lessons of Economy of nurturance they can share.

Nargis and her home were almost done to death during the riots. Yet she regained control and began selling things on the pavement. She had to purchase the right to that tiny space of 3 ft by 3ft, buy the clothes and plastic goods from two whole-sellers to be a pavement vendor.

She borrowed Rs. 5000, her turnover was initially Rs. 100 per day. Today it is Rs. 15,000. She has a strong habit of savings and wisely saves in the various financial products offered by SEWA Bank viz. for education, housing, wedding. She managed her son's wedding without borrowing any money. Her eldest son is now a builder in rural areas and plans to build a real home for the family. She has risen from the roadside and soon intends to buy a shop where her second son will also work with her. She has gas stove at home, and a pension account as well as life insurance through SEWA bank. Ravaged by communal riots, a small financial support nurtured Nargis's life as well as her entrepreneurial spirit, in turn she nurtured her family to a better and more secure life.

Sumitra came to SEWA Bank with one of the SEWA leaders. Like thousands of others, her husband lost his job when the cloth mills closed down in Ahmedabad. She supported her husband to start a tea-stall as he had no other skill for self employment. But since she was a graduate, she took a job in Sarva shiksha abhiyan (Education for all) as a tutor. She also did jewellery work at home. She paid fees for daughter's education (B.Com) with a loan of Rs. 20,000 from SEWA Bank, and also paid for her husband's illness. Her daughter got a job and together they ran the house. They had a neighbor who was in dire straits and desperately needed help so Sumitra, true to her name, borrowed money from SEWA bank for her. Surprisingly SEWA Bank lent her for the neighbour who was also a SEWA member. Even now Sumitra, goes every afternoon to give lunch to another neighbour's child as his mother has a regular job and is away from home. This is what we have almost forgotten, caring, sharing, Anubandh, the nurturance of community and neighbourhood.

Kokila Rana's husband is a newspaper vendor. To add to that limited income. Kokila started a tiffin service with a loan Rs. 5000. She saved, borrowed again from the bank to get an autorikshaw for her husband who then began to earn more. The rikshaw and tiffin service combined, brought more income to the family. Then she took a loan for two houses and she also saved in some gold. She had reason to be happy about life. But then her brother suddenly died, leaving four children. Kokila bore the wedding expense of her brother's daughter. She taught her bhabhi the work of her tiffin service so that she had an income. Today, Kokila has engaged 50 SEWA women in her tiffin service.

Deepa Suryavanshi is a migrant from MP. She opened a savings account in SEWA Bank without telling her husband. She borrowed money to sell plastic bangles in a pushcart. Later on borrowed Rs. 30,000 to 'manufacture' bangles using a machine that was housed in her tiny kitchen in her home in the slums. Now she has upgraded her production with two new computerized machines. Her production has moved to proper shop with a shutter. She has engaged 3 local women for production and another one in her shop. She has made all these women open accounts in SEWA Bank and also gives financial literacy class to women of her community. Her story in the class starts from women keeping a secret saving account to being an employer and now becoming financial consultant to her community!

Jashoda belongs to the conservative Thakore caste, a community that does not allow women to step out of the house. They were landless and very poor. However her father's house stands

on the highway road. So she opened a small restaurant there with a loan. Sewa Bank asked her “Who else will be the co-borrower from your family? She replied who else? It is I who has to run the house and feed my children!” Her little restaurant is open 10 hours a day serving a simple meal of bajra rotla, vegetables, garlic chutney with a cup of tea. She cooks and serves all day, assisted by a young orphan girl. Her husband had deserted her as she broke the rule of the community. But now her elder son persuaded his father to reconcile. Using her savings and another loan, the father and son have bought a small kiosk near her dhabha, to sell cold drinks. The family now stays and works together, sustained and nurtured by her sheer guts, courage and tenacity.

Rukhiben Raghubhai Bhungal is a Bharwad, traditional cowherd community, living in a village in Surendranagar. She is engaged in her traditional community occupation of animal husbandry. Though illiterate herself, she wanted to educate her two daughters even against the will of her community. For that she needed her own income. She joined SEWA’s RUDI, the Rural Marketing Network. She began by selling RUDI products like food grains, cereals, spices and handloom saris worth Rs. 5000 per month. Today she has reached a sale of Rs. 1 lakh per month. From her income she achieved her life goal of educating both her daughters. Her daughter Manisha is a trained nurse working in the Primary Health Centre of her district while Kanku works as a Police constable. Rukhiben started from nothing but has gone on to nurture her family and community with basic needs like food, clothing and through her daughters, healthcare and security. Her saving adds her mite to capital formation at household level and of the nation.

Gandhi is here with us. How simply Gandhiji’s dream of swaraj is expressed through lives of these women.

In my experience, **women are the key** to building a community. Woman is not only a worker, but also a provider, a caretaker, an educator, a net-worker and a vital forger of bonds in a community. Women are an integral part of building stable, peaceful communities, a nation. Such is my confidence in women.

SEWA Bank was in a leading position at the Mexico Women’s **Conference held by UN in 1975**. Here there were women from around the world, their hearts filled with reality needs and aspirations. And here I was having already a one year old regular Bank of poor, illiterate women self employed! Later, with Michaela Walsh of Wall Street, New York and Esther Ocloo a women’s market leader in Accra, Ghana and other strong UN women, we conceived of starting Women’s World ‘Bank’! Within 5 years, we founded **Women’s World Banking** (1979) a Stiftung Trust registered in Netherlands.

In India, we founded Friends of WWB (FWWB) as an independent second-tire lending body whose stories are not different from those in SEWA Bank or beyond the borders of India.

WWB progressed steadily over years, today having outstanding portfolio of more than 5.5 billion dollars, average loan size per borrower is 1200 US dollars (2009). They are spread across five regions of the world. According to the **Study on Women’s Leadership** done by WWB in

2006 of their 226 Affiliates (Partner) in 57 countries, it was found that the women showed “higher return on assets at lower costs.” The research began to reveal that “the loans to women having more autonomy, greater participation in public life.” Banking with women had “multiplier effect”. Evidence showed “poor women re-invested much more of their income in their families and communities than their men did – financing such as for healthcare, education for their children and housing.”

The research states “the woman entrepreneur as the gateway to household and community stability became a fundamental basis for the microfinance business model and a guiding principle behind the value of finance as tool for poverty alleviation.” The study also states that with the pressure to become more commercially oriented as well as the need for skills sets from the private sector are increasing.” “The percentage of women in leadership positions in mF movement is declining.”

To sum up, I would say, **money** in itself is a neutral medium of exchange but it can be used for accumulating more and more (greed) or it can be used for nurturing your economy. It depends on how you view money—is it so important that we trample on others and on nature to get it? Or is it so important because it allows us to nurture our families, our societies and our environment? Ask your self about its impact in anubandh ie in correlation with your own self, your neighbours, community and the Mother Earth and ultimately, who gains and who loses during the journey of finance used by you, by us. When we think in co-relation, we are able to act meaningfully. We do hope, one day economy of nurturance will be the **mainstream economy** of our country.

I conclude my Lecture un concluded as **you**, young friends will **choose** our common future.

[I thank my BEN Team : Jayshree, Renana, Viji, Vijay]