

SHANTIPATH

Our Road to Restoring Peace

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I The Context

Ahmedabad is both an old and a modern industrial city. Unlike Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai*, Ahmedabad was not a creation of the British, but a city which, while remaining true to itself, successfully adapted to the new industrial age. It continued with its age-old commercial and industrial skills and patterns of traditional social organisation.

By the end of the 19th century, Ahmedabad was known as a modern textile centre, and soon was called “the Manchester of India”.

With the textile mills came the first labour union of India, the Textile Labour Association (TLA), started by a daughter of the city, Anasuya Sarabhai, with Mahatma Gandhi. Thus, Ahmedabad was one of the first cities to have an urban working class culture, drawing workers from rural Gujarat as well as other states. The workers drawn from all castes, communities and religions, came in search of employment, primarily in the textile mills.

In the seventies, the slow decline of the textile mills began and by the mid-eighties, thousands of mill workers gradually started getting laid off, were retrenched and forced to eke out a living in the informal economy of Ahmedabad. The reasons for this decline are discussed extensively elsewhere, but here we may note that it was a combination of factors including government policies, the mill-owners’ lack of commitment to the industry and consequent failure to invest in upgrading and keeping the mills competitive, and also the unions’ inability to safeguard workers’ employment and other interests.

As a result of all of the above factors, 80,000 regular mill workers and 50,000 badli’ or temporary workers were rendered jobless. The prosperity of the mills and their union strength had resulted in real gains for the workers. They were organised, more secure, had basic welfare benefits, and were well above the poverty line. The impoverished, rural migrants finally had work and income security, and a far better living standard than their parents could have imagined. But by the eighties, there was a decline in their living standards. Basic work, income and social security were significantly eroded. As their union weakened, workers lost their rights of voice and representation.

The industries which had grown around the mills – dyeing the bales of cloth, chemical industry for dyes and services such as loading and un-loading the cloth – also experienced drastic changes. Thousands of workers, most of them informal or self employed, began to experience economic hardship.

The result of this rapid decline in economic fortunes also became evident by the mid-eighties. The ranks of workers in the informal economy swelled significantly. Today, 77 per cent of all workers in Ahmedabad are engaged in the informal economy. This meant that workers desperate to make a living had to compete in the already over-crowded labour markets. Today there are lines of men, hoping for some work at the ‘Kadia city’s nakas’ – street corners where construction workers are hired on the spot as contract labourers. Similarly, streetvendors report of stiff competition, both in sales and precious work space in the city’s main markets. It is sad to see that the once quite comfortable mill workers have now taken to the streets for survival.

SEWA Witnesses changes

Over the last twenty years, we have been a constant witness to the changing fortunes of working class families. Children have been pulled out of school, as fees, books, uniforms

* Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai are the cities the British called Bombay, Calcutta and Madras respectively.

and other essentials have become out of reach. Women who had never worked outside the home had to join the labour force for the first time. Or there were long lines at SEWA Bank's loan counter, as they tried their hand at business.

Many of our earliest members were wives, mothers sisters and daughters of mill workers. They reported that their men-folk felt 'lost' after the mills closed down – the textile mills were not only their source of employment, but also their way of life. They had gate-meetings, and socialized with workers of all communities and supported each other through times of crisis.

Now all this was going or gone. Women said that many men had turned to drink. Others showed symptoms of stress, frustration and even mental illness like depression. The strength of their union had decreased, their power and voice had weakened, and the old ties and solidarity networks were no longer as active. Our members became desperate : "Give us work, any work," became a common refrain.

In the early nineties, Ahmedabad also began to experience the impact of globalisation. New avenues of employment and investment developed rapidly like the diamond polishing industry, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Export-oriented units in textiles, crafts and other industries grew and prospered. At last, it seemed, that new employment was emerging.

But it soon became apparent that the fruits of globalisation were mixed. Some traditional industries went into decline – like beedi-rolling and weaving – and some grew but then declined or fluctuated according to the changing global demand, as in the case of the diamond industry. In the case of still others, like the construction industry, the earthquake and its aftermath had a major impact. With more stringent building regulations, employment in the construction industry was reduced to a trickle.

Thus, by the mid to late nineties, Ahmedabad was in the grip of economic recession. Our urban members again spoke of great hardship with declining incomes and fewer employment opportunities.

The situation in Gujarat's rural areas was not much different. The textile mills not only meant jobs for aspiring rural migrants, but also an outlet for the cotton grown in the districts of Gujarat. Now that the textile industry was in decline, employment and marketing opportunities had also decreased.

Further, with globalisation, demands for cash crops began to change or fluctuate. Spices, sugar and bananas became high value crops. Meanwhile, the demand for tobacco which accounted for the prosperity of several districts, especially Anand and Kheda, began to decline. New and improved seeds were now available. But these required essential inputs like fertilizers and water which were either expensive or unavailable.

In several districts, three years of continuous drought in the late nineties also took their toll, compounded by the most devastating earthquake in the state's history. In sum, the rural economies of most districts in the northern, central and western districts of Gujarat were either in severe decline or experiencing significant changes. Like their urban counterparts, rural working class families also were facing economic crisis. Many continued to migrate to the already over crowded urban centres like Ahmedabad and Vadodara.

The social fabric of the city also began to change. The first signs of this were evident in communal violence in the mid-eighties. The large scale 1969 communal riots are well within SEWA's memory. But by the eighties and nineties the frequency and intensity of these outbreaks had increased. In early 1993, there was communal violence following the

destruction of the Babri Masjid. In 1999 too, the city of Ahmedabad experienced violence. We had organised rallies and marches led by women in the areas affected by the violence. Over the last twenty years, Bharuch, Panchmahal and Kheda districts, as well as some parts of north Gujarat like Mehsana, have also suffered from communal violence.

SEWA's General Body Meeting

In January 2002, 2000 grassroots SEWA leaders of all communities, castes and religions met at our Annual General Meeting. We sang and ate together, traded stories and experiences. We had a special day-long reflection and discussion on vulnerability and risks faced by poor women workers, rural and urban. The focus of the discussion was the earthquake which just about a year earlier had been the largest disaster to befall our members and how we had been able to cope with the destruction by our organised efforts.

Our reflections focussed, in general, on the frequent and multiple risks faced by individual working class women throughout their lives, as well as the challenges posed to their own economic organisations like SEWA Bank or craft collectives. We emphasised on coping strategies and opportunities for solidarity, capacity-building and more organising.

Just over a month later, on the 26th February the brutal attack on the train at Godhra station occurred. And following this, wave after wave of violence such that the state and its citizens have never witnessed. In our discussions on vulnerability and risks some weeks earlier, we could not have imagined what was in store for us. We had no idea what severe test we would have to undergo.

II 'Bearing the brunt

SEWA's Executive Committee met on February 27th. It was a routine meeting. As usual it took stock of the previous month's activities and planned for the weeks ahead. The Godhra incident had just occurred. We were shocked but yet unaware of the implications.

When the February 28th 'bandh' or total 'shut down' was announced, our concerns and apprehensions increased. We have seen that such bandhs most often result in violence. By the afternoon of the 27th of February violence had broken out in some working class neighbourhoods. On February 28th, 2002 arson, looting and killings spread to every corner of our city.

"I was in a meeting on the 27th in SEWA and we heard about the Godhra incident. We were shocked at this cruel act. On the 28th we all stayed home. From the 28th morning the violence started in our area. In Dariapur, both communities live next to each other. Many times before there has been stone-throwing between the communities, but this time it was much, much worse. I have never seen anything this violent. I was so afraid and kept thinking shall I leave and run away? But where could I go? All around us we could hear sounds of shrieks. We kept hearing people shouting about swords, guns and burning. I was crying with fear. People from other areas, all our members, kept phoning me and telling me what was happening and saying 'save us, save us, tell us what to do'. How could I help anyone if I myself was surrounded? My daughter phoned me from Asarwa. She had fled from her house and was hiding under a bridge surrounded by mobs from three sides. I could hear the mobs shouting. I desperately phoned my SEWA sisters for help. Somehow we managed to get a police squad there and they were saved. This went on for two days.

- Rahimaben, garment worker and Secretary of SEWA

'I was in SEWA's Executive Committee meeting when at around 4.30 pm. there was a call from my house. They said Mansa Masjid is broken and burned and a bus is burnt at Bombay Housing in Saraspur. After finishing my work I left for home, the bus service had stopped by then. On the way home we got the Godhra news.... there was silence when we reached our houses.

The next day was the 28th February, every where, at the same time, in the morning the violence started. It was so intense ... we didn't know where to go and how to save ourselves. We simply left our homes and ran. There was firing and stone-throwing every where. People were killed and injured badly, I tried to contact SEWA colleagues but could not. Our phone and electricity lines were disconnected.

It continued on the 1st of March. In the afternoon, the army came in and we felt relieved. By half past three we felt safer. The army had control over the situation and covered the entire Bapunagar area.

- Jeetunben, incense-stick (agarbatti) roller and SEWA Executive Committee member

Kapilaben, a SEWA organisor from Gomtipur recalls:

What can I tell you? I have seen terrible scenes - everything happened in front of my eyes. I have seen mobs of 4000 to 5000 men stalking the city with guns and swords, burning and looting. I have seen one man's hands cut off, another's stomach ripped open and intestines hanging out. I have also seen the police actively participating in all of this. I have seen the

dead and injured lying on the road with no first aid. I have seen death, blood, suffering, fear – I have seen things like never before. I can never forget what I witnessed.

When I visited Ambikanagar, a Hindu community, there was nothing there; everything had been razed to the ground. It was the same for Mariam bibi ka Masjid, a Muslim area. Not a single hut was left. All we could see were the charred remains of the house and the belongings strewn about. I sat down and cried, how can we rebuild after such destruction ?

One of our member's two daughters were to be married off recently. When I went to visit her, she was in shock. She showed me half burnt pieces of red cloth and other bridal finery from her daughters' trousseau which she had spent a lifetime collecting. She also showed me half burnt wads of rupees notes.

On the 28th and 29th, all we could hear were cries for help and smoke billowing in the sky. If you were at a high point, all you could see was fire and smoke. It seemed that the whole city was burning. Although where I stay was safe, we kept a constant vigil and did not step out of the house for those two days. Throughout, there were loud and terrified cries for help. On the 29th, by four o'clock in the evening, it was as if the sun had also hid its face in shame. It was dark and overcast, with fear and smoke hanging in the air. It was truly a dark day; the sun had set for us.

- Shardaben, beedi worker and long-time SEWA member.

SEWA leaders or 'aagewans', and organisers (staff) all tried to contact each other on the phone. SEWA Bank's loans for phones had come in handy! We knew that many of the neighbourhoods where SEWA members lived and worked were severely affected. We worried about our sisters in the villages from whom, at first, it was harder to get any information.

As violence continued unabated, curfew spread to several wards of the city, we kept in touch constantly by telephone. All day and night our members and aagewans would phone, appraising us of the situation, pleading for help, weeping desperately, relieved to find an old colleague safe and above all, asking us to approach the government to call out the army.

All the time I was at home I would keep phoning people in all areas – SEWA leaders in Dariapur itself, like Ramilaben, Subhadraben and Jaitoonben in violence-torn areas like Bapunagar, Gomtipur. I was also in constant touch with police stations in different parts of the city and an army captain. I was afraid that someone would trace my phone calls and would attack me. Then I thought, 'I have to die one day. I am trying to protect people and bring about peace. I am trying to bring people together, so let me not be afraid'.

- Rahimaben

I used the by-lanes to move safely and check on our members from the neighbouring Muslim communities. I was not afraid to go there, I had worked in those areas for years. They were my SEWA sisters. I was very worried about their well-being and determined to help in which ever way I could. I would then call up my SEWA colleagues and ask for advice. On some days I would leave my young son sleeping in the house and return in the evening after he had gone to bed.

- Savitaben, union organizer and vegetable vendor

It was becoming clear that the police and other state machinery were not only incapable of controlling the murderous mobs, but also did not want to do so. With a few exceptions, they either turned a blind eye or actively aided the attackers as reported by our members.

We felt desperate to do something to do help. We frantically called the police, senior officers in the bureaucracy whom we knew, elected city councillors, even the Mayor. Some expressed sympathy, most said that they were helpless. The general message we obtained was that the situation was beyond anyone's control. We felt helpless and yet moved to act at once.

The phone never stopped ringing in my house for three days and three nights. On the night of 28th, Rahimaben, SEWA's secretary from Dariapur called me by the hour, asking for help. The mob was approaching, help us, she pleaded. I called the administration, police, councillors, corporators - anybody and everybody I knew in the establishment in Gujarat and in Delhi. All I heard was 'we will try, sorry the situation is not in our control, there is not much that we can do'.

- Miraiben, Coordinator, Social Security

I have two phones and I was constantly on the phone in those early days, sometimes on both simultaneously. Kapilaben, Jeetunben, Ramilaben, Rahimaben called me constantly, informing me about the rioting in their areas, sometimes crying and shouting asking me to organize help. I, in turn called the local police thannas and chowkis, asking them to send their contingent to the area. When the violence continued, the faith in the local police also diminished. Call the army they said. How could I call the army? My only effort was to reassure them. Sometimes, I lied. Don't panic, the army is on its way.

In the initial two days, I could not go out of my house due to the curfew, but many of the local leaders or aagewans were on the road, defying the mob and curfew, inquiring about their colleagues and other SEWA members. They would call me and often give me account of the areas. I was very worried about them. I sometimes, shouted at them. What are you doing so far away from home, go home, it is too dangerous to venture out.'

- Manaliben, Chief Organiser, Ahmedabad SEWA

"This was my first experience in dealing with communal riots in the city. It was not easy for me. I was getting so many phone calls for help. I felt very worried but could not go to the spot myself in the first few days. Yet I had to respond to our members' plight. I kept in touch with the administration, calling up senior government officials - asking for help and identifying tense areas – sometimes even at very odd hours of the night.

We received calls from our members from other districts as well. We had to deal with the feelings of insecurity among all our members, including those in districts not affected by the violence.

- Reemaben, General Secretary, SEWA

In the rural areas, keeping in touch with our members was more of a challenge. This is because our members are spread out in the villages. In any one village, all women there are not our members. At the same time, our members are geographically dispersed throughout a particular district, some in remote hamlets far from the main road. Communication is difficult. Still, we tried our best to keep in touch with them in the affected villages.

We learned that, the violence spread rapidly to the rural areas of Gujarat as well. Jyoti Macwan, the District Co-ordinator for Anand and Kheda Districts explains :

When violence started in the villages, members called in: 'everything is burning', they said. Throughout the day, we got information as to where the violence was spreading over the phone. Our members and grassroots leaders had stopped coming in to the office. This office which normally is full of members and leaders was deserted.

I have never seen such violence, such cruelty. I felt sick. And desperate. I sat in my hut and shuddered, as I heard the cries of my fellow villagers and saw the smoke billowing from their huts. I felt helpless. Where would they go? Would they survive? How could I help? I couldn't sleep at night. I tried to get my neighbours together. Marthaben, they told me. There are mobs several hundred strong. What can we do? Our village has never seem anything like this. You can't do anything right now'. Still, I slipped out of my house and through the back lanes tried to see if I could reach our members. I couldn't see anything. There was smoke everywhere. I went back home with a heavy heart.

- *Marthaben, tobacco worker and SEWA Executive Committee member, Bedva village, Kheda district.*

Ranbai SEWA's President could not reach Ahmedabad because of curfew. She phoned Reemaben : "Please tell your city people to stop this madness. We poor can't afford all this killing..... How long can we hold on to peace and sanity in my village.... Stop the daily bad news in your newspapers... We are doing our best to keep all our members together here...."

- *Ranbai Rauma President, SEWA Gum Plucker Antarnesh Village, Patan Village.*

As soon as we could obtain curfew passes – about three days after the violence, we began to visit the violence-torn areas. It was clear that the poorest of families – the informal workers of our city were the worst affected. Our members had suffered unimaginable losses. They had lost family members, their homes and all they had ever owned. Years of labour to build a roof over their heads and savings had been reduced to rubble. Livelihoods had been destroyed. We heard stories of barbarity and cruelty that defied belief. Children had witnessed wanton killings of their family members and neighbours.

As we visited the relief camps of the victims, we were met with people desperate, dazed and in shock. In some, the men were openly hostile and asked us to leave. But then SEWA members would recognize us, cling to us and weep. We sat down and took some deep breath. There was little one could do at that time, but the togetherness meant that at least we were not alone nor abandoned. Later Kulsumbibi, a garment worker, whose home also housed SEWA Bank's extension counter at Saraspur said:

"If I had not met you sisters, I don't know what I would have done. I was completely without hope. I had no desire to live. Look how the mobs have destroyed my home. But when I saw you, I knew that my SEWA family was with me. It brought back the will to survive".

In Dariapur, as our team arrived, we were surrounded by a sea of faces who broke down. As we all stood in tears, we felt a deep sadness for all that we had suffered. We stood for what seemed like ages on the usually busy Jordan Road. All around the perimeter, men of all ages watched silently as we, women of all communities, stood together, arms wrapped around each other.

We then walked to Prem Darvaza and went to the relief camp there. Our members saw us and ran to us weeping. Their homes had been destroyed completely and looted.

In Saraspur's Jalim pur ni Chaali, we wandered through the usually crowded by lanes. There was not a soul in sight. All had fled to the Bakar Shah Roza camp across the high wall of the Himadri textile mill. Then we saw a man standing before what was once his ten by fifteen home. His cycle lay burned and mangled one side and the ash-covered, damaged sewing machine of his wife lay in another corner. Broken cups, plates and once carefully stored food grains lay burned and scattered on the ground.

The man broke down and sobbed :

'Sisters, see my life's work down the drain. We are migrants from U.P. There is no work there, so we came here years ago. Gujarat and Ahmedabad has become our home. We made a living here. But then this violence – this is the third time that we have suffered like this. Where shall we go ? What shall I do now?'

I could hardly console the man, a daily wage labourer. We told to him that a SEWA team will be at the relief camp every day if he needed anything. As we left, he was still standing in front of his house.

- *Hanifaben, Block-print worker and insurance team member.*

Apart from the terrible loss of human life, injury, damage and total destruction of homes and property, people's livelihoods have been severely affected. For months, our members were unable to go out to work. Home-based workers were neither getting raw materials regularly, nor was anyone coming to collect their finished goods. Factories, shops, warehouses and godowns had been burnt to the ground, affecting the entire work chain, dependent mainly on informal workers.

Baluben is a food vendor. She used to sell eatables in the walled city area.

'I recently borrowed from SEWA Bank to buy a refrigerator to sell cold drinks during the summer. Look what has happened to my refrigerator, my vending cart and my home. Everything was gutted. I will have to rebuild from scratch, both my home and my means of livelihood.'

Fatima is a garment worker who along with her two daughters used to stitch petticoats for a trader. She lost both her sewing machines and her home.

Like Baluben and Fatimaben, thousands of workers' economic lives have been severely destroyed. Our preliminary surveys of the affected neighbourhoods in Ahmedabad – Gontipur, Rakhiyal, Saraspur, Kalupur, Odhav, Naroda and more – showed the huge extent of losses.

The atmosphere in the city and villages in the early days of March and even later, is hard to describe. Fear, insecurity and tension were almost palpable: normally bustling markets, were silent but far from peaceful. One never knew from one moment to the next when and where violence would break out.

Even those members who did not have to flee their homes were curfew bound. For weeks no one had slept. Mothers reported that their children clung to them desperately or had nightmares.

And then there were the threats. The members, aagewans and organisers were warned openly to 'stay clear' or else face the consequences. Their families were threatened, and we even received threats with regard to SEWA's own premises.

In this climate of shock, fear and threats, all we could think of was to save lives. This was the biggest human - made crisis that we had ever confronted. Our union had to survive this

crisis. We worked hard to unionise our workers, have waged several struggles together and have built our own bank, cooperatives and social security programmes. We were determined to survive this crisis, keep safe and united.

As a union, we organise on the basis of work. Each urban area and village have local union leaders or aagewans who constitute a district wise trade committees. Women of all communities and religions, bound together by their identity as workers, constituted these committees. The continuing violence challenged our unity and strength. It was clear that we had to act at once both for our survival and our unity.

III. Action for relief, rehabilitation and peace

Our hearts were heavy as we met at SEWA on March 4th, 2002. SEWA executive committee members, aagewans and organisers, all sat together and prayed Gandhiji's Sarvadharma or all faith prayer with his pledge for peace and non-violence. Elaben, our founder, was with us and listened intently as we spoke of what we saw, our pain, the helplessness we felt and our firm commitment to protect our members and our union. We decided that we should put our full strength first into relief and then rehabilitation of all affected people, as it is our "dharma". We discussed possible courses of action. We also discussed : Should we make a public appeal for peace? Will anyone listen in this charged atmosphere? What is the first priority of our sisters? Survival. We decided to concentrate on reaching out to our members and other affected people.

All we had seen and witnessed, the threats and dangers involved in moving around even as relief workers, pointed to a course of humanitarian action based on the victims' immediate needs within the camps and in the neighbourhoods. A clear consensus on this emerged before the meeting concluded.

We had courage and organisational strength, but we were also aware of our limitations. We decided that we would provide services in five relief camps, out of 46, located in areas with strong SEWA membership. While we would serve all affected families, our base in those neighbourhoods would give us access and credibility vis-à-vis the camps' residents. Initially, we would focus on food, medical care, child care and sanitation.

The next step was to see how we could help women start working and earning. Our experiences during the earthquake just over a year earlier, convinced us that for poor women livelihood restoration must be in the centre of all relief and rehabilitation efforts. In the earthquake affected districts, the first question the affected members had asked us was: 'why did you not bring work for us?' We had no doubt that the same was true for the victims of this communal violence.

And so we got to work. In teams with aagewans and organisers from both communities, Muslim and Hindu, we began working in the five relief camps. Initially, foodgrains and medical supplies came from our own union's emergency fund. Soon, OXFAM, the Red Cross and the government began to supply us with essential goods.

The five camps we began working in were :

- Aman Chowk, Bapunagar, Anand Flats, Bapunagar, Bombay Housing, Saraspur, Bakar Shah Roza, Saraspur, and Dani Limda.

These are working class neighbourhoods. Ten teams were formed. Meanwhile, main responsibilities for the various aspects of relief and rehabilitation were shared among SEWA's senior leadership. As General Secretary, Reemaben would coordinate all the various efforts. She would specifically focus on livelihood restoration and coordination with the government. Our Secretaries, Rahimaben and Namrataben were to lead the peace-keeping processes, especially supporting women in their attempts to live together as before. Miraiben, our social security coordinator was to organise – childcare, health care, including trauma counselling, and insurance, both at the camps and outside. Jayshreeben, SEWA Bank's Managing Director initiated efforts at economic rehabilitation through restoration of assets and providing emergency financial services. Renanaben, our national Coordinator and SEWA Bank's Chairperson was to mobilize resources, push for policies based on victims' needs and help link us up with the outside world, including the international labour movement.

Affected Members in the Riots 2002 : Ahmedabad city

S.N.	Name of the Camp SEWA where was working	No. of affected members
1.	Aman Chowk	3000
2.	Anand Flats	700
3.	Bombay Housing	200
4.	Bakarsha Na Roja	1000
5.	Danilimda	300
	Total	5200
	Other Camps	16700
	Total Members of SEWA in Camps	21900
	Affected Members residing outside the camp	17000
	Total affected members	38900

The teams were headed by our experienced SEWA organisers or aagewans. They were to take all decisions at the camp, and work closely with the managers of each relief camp. In fact, the first thing we did was to meet the managers and seek their support and advice. We also shared our ideas about what we could do. Many of the camps' managers were local leaders and known to us. Because of SEWA's role in earlier riots in the city, they were aware of our work and our approach. All of this facilitated our work at the camps in Ahmedabad city. In the camps we did not make any distinction between members and non-members.

On March 6th, 2002 our teams began work in the camps. Foodgrains were distributed immediately. Five days' worth of rations at 5 kilogrammes per head, comprising rice, lentils and milk powder were distributed to 30,000 families, of our members and non-members. Similarly, our health team treated minor injuries, burns and common ailments. A list of patients with serious wounds and health problems was prepared and we began talking to the municipal authorities for help.

Within a few days, municipal, state government and Red Cross teams were providing services in all the five camps.

On the 5th, the official camp started and government relief began. SEWA leaders including myself helped in the camp. SEWA was the first to even come in to our area to inquire about us and provide us with help.

Our mental condition was so terrible, that we just could not think. We were still under shock and fear. Thanks to SEWA services like childcare, health care, and the employment that helped us to cope gradually. The women in very camp have started earning some income, which is a big relief. Soon I knew that I would have to take up the tasks of this camp, I knew. So I gathered courage.

- Jaitoonben, Agarbatti worker & Executive Committee member.

Livelihood Restoration

As we had decided that livelihood restoration and creation was to be at the centre of all our relief and rehabilitation work, we began organising this at once. Employment teams at each camp ensured that every woman earned Rs 40 per day.

Sometimes, it was easy to identify the economic activity for a camp while at other times we had to find innovative alternatives. For instance, most of our members in the Bapunagar relief camp, were bidi workers and agarbatti makers. Therefore, the first economic activities to get organised were bidi and agarbatti rolling. Over the years, having organised thousands of these workers, we have built up a rapport with merchants and contractors. We contacted the bidi manufacturers directly, and took them to the camp with us. They were very

cooperative and ready to provide work even at the relief camps. However the contractors or middlemen, who supply the raw materials and collect the finished product from the workers, were either unavailable or unwilling. So SEWA took on this role. Soon women were back at work rolling bidis or agarbattis. Our leaders in the camp like Subhadraben and Sudammaben took on the task of counting and collecting bidis and delivering them to the manufacturers. And with childcare at the camps, women were making as many as 1000 bidis a day, earning 34 rupees in a day.

- Manaliben, Chief Organizer, Ahmedabad SEWA

Next we organized sewing machines at the camps, first in Aman chowk and then at Bakarshah Roza. Many of the women there were garment workers. They began to sew in two shifts producing salwar kameezes, earning Rs 12 per set. They were provided cut-pieces prepared by a local cutter, often from the relief camp itself. In this way, the garment workers began to earn again. They worked for the traders, but some began selling salwar-kameezes at the camps itself, since most women had fled with only the clothes they had been wearing.

Finding work for women at the Dani Limda relief camp was not so easy. They were headloaders, casual workers and street vendors. Venturing out to work was not possible. Making paper bags was one option which later proved to be a popular activity. Even older children and men joined in this work. Since the space required to make bags is small, it was convenient for women and their families to do this work. They were provided with old magazines and gum, and given a day's training to prepare the bags. The bags were then sold to merchants and shopkeepers. SEWA's Health Cooperative also bought paper bags for use in its chain of medicine shops, thus promoting solidarity between workers.

Members also made quilts called 'godhris' at the camps. They were prepared from old sarees and bits of scrap cloth available in the market. Each woman was provided a sewing kit. She could earn around Rs 36 a day if she sewed three mattresses a day.

Within the first week of our relief efforts, different economic activities were organized.

Employment organized up by SEWA in the five relief camps

Sr. No.	Camp's Name	Employment / Work per day		Total Income / day (Rs.)	Total Income in 3 months
		Type of Work	Women		
1.	Danilimda	Mattress making	30	1080	97,200
		Paper Bags	25	500	45,000
2.	Anand Flats	Bidi Making	60	2040	183,600
		Mattress making	25	900	81,000
3.	Aman Chowk	Agarbatti rolling	200	5500	495,000
		Paper Bags	100	2000	180,000
		Mattress making	70	2520	226,800
		Stitching work (Dress)	40	800	72,000
		Paper Files – Folders	15	300	27,000
4.	Bombay Housing	Mattress making	25	900	81,000
5.	Bakarsha Na Roja	Paper Bags	100	2000	180,000

		Mattress making	35	1260	113,400
		Stitching work (Dress)	30	600	54,000
		Stitching work (Frocks)	10	200	18,000
		Stitching work (Cloth bags)	25	500	45,000
		Paper Files – Folders	15	300	27,000
		Total Women	805 women	21,400	19,26,000

Note : The income figures are based on averages for each activity.

Employment restored to members outside the camps, through SEWA's linkages with employers or contractors :

1. Bidi Rolling :

7,000 members earning Rs 34 per day and they could roll 700 to 1,000 bidis per day.
Average Income in 3 months (7000 women) = Rs 2,14,20,000

2. Agarbatti Rolling :

5,000 members could roll 5,000 agarbattis each day. They get Rs 5.50 per 1,000 bidis therefore they can earn Rs 27.50 per day.
Average Income in 3 months (5000 members) = Rs 1,23,75,000

Rs. 3,37,95,000

Of course, nothing has been smooth. The violence had not stopped and the curfew was in force many areas. Individual threats continued. Also, space for the livelihood-related activities like sewing was an issue in the over crowded camps. At Dani Limda, the camp itself had to close down and start up again because of management problems. In the Anand flats' camp most of the women who were bidi rollers used the corridors of the school for bidi rolling. Similarly, the Bombay Housing camp was also located in a school at Saraspur. Women, mostly vendors, were unable to go out to sell their vegetables for several weeks. Instead they sewed 'godhris' in the schools' courtyard.

At Aman Chowk, the relief camp managers turned over the local madrassa to SEWA. "This is God's work", they said, "Use it as you see fit".

The madrassa became a focal point of all our relief activities at Aman Chowk. On one side, the child care activities with children of all ages was going on and on the other, sewing machines were installed in another corner 'godhris' kits are being distributed. Later on the child care centre was shifted to the municipal school near by, with the help of the local councillor.

At the Bakar Shah Roza camp, space posed practical problems. The Roza land has the grave of a Sufi saint and others. There was very little space to set up sewing machines or make paper bags in a situation where thousands had taken refuge. Finally, the camp's organisers turned one area of the camp over to us for economic activities. And then women began to sew on the machines in shifts, thereby ensuring that the maximum number got work and income.

SEWA took over the marketing of the finished products : paper bags, 'godhris', light mattresses and readymade garments. Some of the women at the camps bought 'godhris' and clothes, once the government gave them some cash compensation. Others were sold

in the open market. Also, some NGOs in Ahmedabad bought 'godhris' for their child care centres in the city.

SEWA's craft association and Trade Facilitation Centre gave women orders to sew cloth bags as carry bags for their products. The latter are to be sold domestically and at exhibitions overseas.

Later on, a linkage with the Red Cross Society proved helpful. They provided us fabric and machines, to sew salwar kameezes' which they then bought.

2) Childcare

Child care centers were started immediately in all the camps. The infants and young children upto six years were taken care of and provided food and milk at the child care centres. Activity centres for the children in the age group of 7 to 14 years were also initiated. The focus was on providing support and constructive activities for the children, most of whom were either still in shock or fear. In the camps, there were young and experienced teachers who offered their services which was very helpful.

Between 80 to 300 children were taken care of at the five childcare centres. The children expressed their feelings by drawing and painting on paper. We have a wonderful collection of about 6000 pictures done by the child victims. They need special attention. SEWA also collaborated with the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) of the Government of Gujarat who recognised the centres, providing regular supply of food. SEWA, through its catering cooperative, 'Trupti', prepared extra nutritious food such as *sukhdi* (mixture of Indiamix flour, jaggery and *ghee*) and *ladoos* on alternate days and distributed these to the children. Childcare services were very much appreciated by the parents. The care also allowed the mothers to do their wage work. However, space was a basic constraint. Otherwise more could have been done for children.

3) Health Care

SEWA's health cooperative with their health teams, provided daily healthcare and coordinated closely with the municipal corporation and the government health services. Our health cooperative 'Lok Swasthya' arranged for medicines and referral services.

A gynecologist and a pediatrician regularly examined women and children respectively. Patients on longer-term treatment for tuberculosis or thalassemia were taken to hospitals so that their treatment continued.

Ayeshaben, a health worker from Sunderamnagar in the Odhav area described her experience.

"I kept working as long as I could on that day, giving health advice, medicines and help to women and their families. Soon the violence spread to my own area. My sons and I had to move into a refugee camp for our safety. It was a nightmare. Thousands like me crowding the camp.... I started my health work there too! I told the relief camp managers that I was a health worker and could provide services. Soon a steady stream of women and children came to me. I gave them whatever medicines I could. Our SEWA health cooperative provided me with extra supplies.

It was only later that the municipal health workers and doctors reached our camp. They were well-stocked with medicines. They immunised the children. I continued to provide services at the camp and also helped coordinate with the government's medical services. The doctors asked me to help bring patients and explain to them. I also did the follow-up of each patient in the evenings as the doctors left by then."

Varlakshmiben is a bidi worker and an experienced health worker who lives in Pathan-ni-chaali, Saraspur. She recalls :

“My area experienced terrible violence. Although my chaali was untouched, the adjacent ones : Chunilal Jethalal ni Chaali, Bara Sacha ni Chaali and others were totally destroyed. SEWA’s health centre and SEWA Bank’s counter are located in Bara Sacha ni Chaali. Both were completely destroyed. After the violence and when it was safe to go out, I rushed to the health centre. That’s where I sit every day providing health services to all our members. I wept when I saw the state of total destruction.

Then I recovered and started contacting our members. Some had fled to the relief camp at Bombay housing and others had gone to the Bakar Shah Roza camp. I tried to go to both but the police prevented me from going to the Roza camp.

I provided whatever first-aid I could to our members – they had cuts and burns. Some needed stitches. I took them to Shardaben Hospital near by where SEWA Health Cooperative has its medicine shop. It was the only one open and functioning in our entire area.

When SEWA began its relief activities in the Bombay Housing camp, I became part of that team. I still continue to provide mainly health services and I help with the young children at our makeshift crèche. When I have nothing else to do, I listen to my members and try to comfort them, to soothe them and calm them down...”

SEWA organizers at the camp involved camp residents and local committees in cleaning the campsites every day. They also helped them in organizing proper garbage disposal, cleaning of toilets, making temporary toilets, using disinfectant sprays.

4) Mental Health

When we visited the affected neighbourhoods and relief camps, we could see first-hand the deep scars of the violence on their minds. The Relief Camp Teams reported “as soon as they see us, they would cling (both communities) to us and start sobbing uncontrollably. That would make us weep, and for a while it became a joint weeping session!”

Apart from the adults, the children have suffered tremendously. They have witnessed violence and the terror. Much is unspoken. But their drawings at our crèches in the relief camps, graphically say it all. In the early days, the children drew people with stones in their hands, swords and burning houses. It was only after the first two weeks that these gave way to flowers, mehndi designs, the national flag and landscape scenes.

It is harder with the men. They may know us by name and face. They see us with their mothers and sisters, and know that we are close. But they do not share their grief and trauma with us so easily.

In Chaar Toda Kabristan relief camp, we were playing “Chhuk-Chhuk Gaadi” – pretending we were on a train passing through different parts of India, visiting our historical and cultural sites – the Red Fort, The Taj Mahal, the seashore in Mumbai. As we snaked through the camp, whistling and hooting like a train, the children laughed and screamed. Even their parents smiled, as we ran past.

Suddenly, a little five year old asked us:

“Teacher, my house was burned why did they do that?”

Another girl chipped in:

“And mine was looted. We ran all the way here.”

“We are all God’s children”, that was the only response we could give at that time.

The children nodded. The ‘train’ left for the next station – amidst hoots and whistles. More and deeper healing is clearly needed.

5) Literacy

An unexpected outcome of our work in the relief camps was the demand for non-formal education or literacy classes. The women at the camps said that some of them and their children, mainly girls, did not know how to read and write. “We now have the time to learn,” they said, “better to do something useful. Or else memories of all we went through spin around us”.

Most of the women wanted to learn the Gujarati alphabet. SEWA’s Literacy team, organised by the SEWA Academy, got to work at once. Young school girls from the Camp joined the Team in the literacy activities.

At first our organizers had to listen and provide counselling to the women and girls. They needed to talk out their fears and experiences. Gradually, they began to be interested in reading and writing.

There were some practical issues too. Some of the women were Telugu-speaking. It took a while for our teachers to figure out how to communicate with them effectively.

“At first the girls and women were restless. They were still full of fear and were distracted. Slowly, they began to practise writing Gujarati. That requires concentration and effort. And so they became involved in learning. Once they learned to read and write, the girls promised to stay in touch. ‘We will write you postcards to practice and keep contact’”. And they did!

- Meenaben, member of SEWA’s Literacy Team.

Relief camps in the rural areas

Organising relief and rehabilitation for SEWA’s rural members was equally important but initially posed some difficult issues. For one thing, as mentioned earlier, SEWA’s organised strength in the different villages of the affected districts varied considerably. In some villages, almost all the women were our members. And in others, only a handful had joined SEWA.

While we were clearly committed to supporting all women and their families, regardless of their membership status, we had to be careful not to expose them to any danger or attract undue attention or even retaliation. With inadequate police and other security personnel in the villages, we had to be judicious so that our members would not be singled out as targets of violence.

So, we had to first gather as much information as possible on our members’ whereabouts and needs. We also visited the villages first hand to see when and how relief work could be initiated. After quite some time, the affected families were reached to the district towns, by SEWA.

Affected Members in Rural Districts

S.N.	Name of District	No. of affected members
1.	Anand/Kheda	10,000
2.	Sabarkantha	1,000
3.	Mehsana	1,500
4.	Vadodara	1,000
	Total	13,500
	Affected Members residing outside the camp	38,900
	Total SEWA members affected	52,400

Jyoti Macwan, District Coordinator of Anand reports:

On reaching the camp, all the men came up to me and started asking questions. I explained to them about SEWA. Many of our members at the camp told them in detail about our childcare centres and savings groups in their villages. Soon we could start work in two camps in Anand. In another camp, the children immediately recognized us. That helped us start relief work. We started work at the Ismailnagar relief camp. Like in Ahmedabad, we began with health and childcare activities. Then we began to work in Kohinoor, Green Park and Naya Vatan relief camps.

It was dangerous work. We were threatened constantly 'why are you working in the relief camps?' we were asked, 'stop at once. Or you will have to face the consequences'. We got several anonymous and threatening phone calls too. But we quietly persisted. After a few days, our local leaders, executive committee members and others started coming in from the villages to help. I felt stronger then. We got curfew pass from the mamlatdar's office. Our district midwives cooperative provided first aid and the people in the relief camps said that they would only leave their children or take medicines from us. We worked with 1100 children and provided health services to 1600 people.

There were as many as 200 to 500 children in each of the camps where we began work. The first thing we did was put up cradles for the babies. We divided the children according to their age groups and played with them – cricket and other games. We had to plan on a daily basis.

After some weeks, villagers from the affected areas came and escorted those who had to flee back to their villages. Efforts to heal and for reconciliation were made like eating together. All communities promised to live and work together. Except for two or three villages, most and the camps' inmates have returned to their own villages.

Providing Services outside relief camps

SEWA Bank

The SEWA Bank has a wide network in the working class areas of Ahmedabad city as well as in the rural areas. Women come to the bank often to deposit or withdraw savings, to apply for loans, to pay their loan instalments or for financial counselling. The Bank itself is physically spread throughout the city. The main bank centre is near the main SEWA office, but much of the business is carried out through the ten banking centres and the mobile bank vans, which travel to every part of the city. The actual financial services are provided by are the 'bank-sathis' and the 'handholders', a team of women who live in the areas and serve as 'mini-banks-. They collect savings, loan instalments, recommend new loans and generally look after the financial health of their members in the areas. In Anand and Kheda districts too collection of savings and loan installments continued despite the violence.

"I had taken a loan for Rs 25,000 from the SEWA Bank last December. With it I rebuilt my house, I also made an extra room. I make kites at home and my husband drives a rickshaw and with our earnings we were repaying the instalments. My house is now destroyed and so is my husband's rickshaw.....I had carefully put my SEWA identity card, my share certificates, my passbook in a plastic folder. I found my house burnt down. The attackers had taken out my plastic folder of papers and torn them into little bits. I found only a little torn piece of my share certificate. My Bank will help me make fresh papers..... This was my fourth loan. I had built up a reputation for good repayment in the Bank. I hate to lose that reputation indeed.

- Bilkisben, Kite-maker from Abadnagar, now living in Shah Alam relief camp

I feel so disheartened when I see the familiar faces of our bank clients whose lives had so improved now helplessly waiting in the refugee camps. All the assets they had generated through their savings, taking out loans and their own hard work have been reduced to zero.

And yet, I feel so humbled when the women in the relief camps (our borrowers) financially ruined by the riots give me assurances that they will make their loan repayments as soon as they can.

- Jayshree Vyas, Managing Director, SEWA Bank

Responding to Bilkisben, and many others like her, SEWA Bank conducted a survey of the losses suffered by its loanees and is now in the process of rescheduling their loans, so that the women can repay when they start earning. Those women who are unable to repay, have been allowed to extend their loans over a longer time period and repay later. At the same time, the Bank is helping them get maximum compensation for those who lost their possessions.

In a major initiative, the bank sanctioned new loans to those who lost their houses or possessions so as to enable them to restart their lives and livelihoods. A new bank scheme is being introduced called "Rebuilding Our Lives" where those women who have suffered work-related losses are given special loans, to buy new tools replace their capital and start working and earning again.

The Bank is also helping women like Bilkisben restore their lost records from its computerised data bank.

"I would hang my bank-sathi identity card around my neck and go out into the street. There were police all around. They would beat their sticks on the ground or point their guns to frighten me, and shout at me to go back. However, I would tell them who I was and show them my bank-sathi identity card and they would let me through. Once a policeman chased me, but I stood my ground. I would pass deserted and burnt out shops and houses. It was terrifying. But our women needed to give me their money for safe keeping. They would be waiting for me. 'We are so glad you came they would say, please take our money and put it away carefully in the bank'. I would take their money sometimes 10,000 rupees or more in this frightening atmosphere. Everyday as I went out of the house, I would put myself in God's hands. And so far I have always come back safely!"

- Rekhaben, bank sathi of Shahpur area

"Our depositors belong to both communities. Despite the violence I would go to their houses and collect their savings. They were concerned about my safety and they would say, 'You must leave at once. It is unsafe'. In one area a mob chased me and I ran. I fell down and later had to have 12 stitches. But I have not stopped going to that area. I tell the members to meet me at the bus stop nearby. We meet there and I take their savings from them. Once, in the midst of violence I could not get to the bank's extension counter. I had more than Rs 25,000 with me. So I phoned our bank and soonest they sent a team to a place near my house. I met them there and handed over the money. In this way we kept our work always going."

- Urmilaben Barad, Bank Saathi'

Health services

Throughout the violence, SEWA's health workers and midwives, our barefoot doctors, continued to provide door-to-door services to our members of all communities.

“Even through the violence, people would come to me for first-aid and for medicines for coughs, colds, headaches, diarrhoea and other problems. With curfew everywhere, where else could they go ?

I live in the Dani Limda Behrampura area which witnessed several major violent outbreaks. By day I would be at home giving people medicines or moving house-to-house in the areas. By night I myself moved out of our neighbourhood.

But I continued working... I even accompanied some women to L.G. Hospital for further care...”

- Jadiben Solanki, health worker and Secretary, Lok Swasthya health cooperative.

The drug store run by SEWA’s health cooperative was the only one open in the entire city during the first few days. Our young sisters ran the drug store continuously for three days and two nights because their replacements were in curfew bound areas.

“On those days we did not even get enough time to eat. We were on our feet constantly. Whoever felt tired sat down and did the billing while the other person would search the shelf for the medicines. Sometimes, the electricity would be cut off during the night and we would work in candlelight. There was a rush of patients, day and night, - some badly injured and bleeding, frantic relatives, some even came with police protection. We saw badly mutilated corpses and severely injured people. I felt scared but only momentarily so – I am a SEWA member, there is no place for fear in my life. All I concentrated was on doing my duty to the best of my ability. Sometimes, we gave away free drugs to poor ailing patients too. Our SEWA sisters, kept phoning us, encouraging and supporting us. We felt very much motivated by that. Our neighbours sent us food and many Muslim families from the vicinity came to ask about our welfare.”

- Alkaben and Harshidaben, organizers, Lok Swasthya drug store

Insurance

SEWA has a regular insurance service for the members. SEWA has been insuring women by linking with the insurance companies for a decade.

In all 93,000 members have insurance coverage. After the violence we were flooded with phone calls from our insured members requesting us to come and assess losses incurred. But there was strict curfew was in their areas. However as soon as we could, we undertook the first task was of conducting house-to-house surveys.

The process of assessing losses suffered by insured women to be reimbursed by SEWA Insurance, was itself fraught with danger. As we visited the affected areas accompanied by the National Insurance Company’s senior officer, Mr. Bhavsar, reactions were mixed. Some were relieved that SEWA organisers had come and said this gave them strength. Mr. Bhavsar later remarked that he was very moved – he had never visited such neighbourhoods and seen such suffering in all his years at the insurance company.

In some areas, we were met with open hostility. Our colleagues who went to Ode village in Anand district to assess damage claims were surrounded by people who demanded to know why they had come. “Get out of here”, they were told, “We don’t want any surveyors here.” Stones were thrown at our team and they had to complete their work quickly and quietly.

Peace Keeping

Even as we began work in the relief camps the violence continued. There would be a few days of calm followed by curfew relaxation. And then a new round of violence and killings

would begin. Many SEWA aagewans our grassroot level leaders, and union organisers did all they could to prevent and curtail the violence. Peace-keeping efforts were constantly undertaken by our brave Rahimas and Shardas.

Bashiranben of Anand once spoke memorable words during a meeting with Mrs. Clinton in SEWA "I am not afraid of anyone. I do not fear not my sheth (factory owner), sarpanch (village headman), police or my own husband", These words have been off repeated by Mrs. Clinton in public and quoted in the World Bank President's Report. Bashiranben this time was engaged in courageous peace keeping efforts in her village.

"There was no trouble in my village of 500 households. Both Hindus and Muslims decided to be vigilant. Our village headman, the sarpanch, was very helpful. If anyone sensed any trouble, he or she would alert the whole village. We resolved to face this crisis together. In the village square I spoke out. 'We are all one. The same blood runs through our veins, whether we call the Almighty Ram or Rahim. We only have each other to protect. So we must keep all in our village together – like one family.'"

- *Bashiranben, tobacco worker, midwife and SEWA Executive Committee member, Kheda district.*

Mine is a small predominantly Hindu chawl, surrounded by a largely Muslim area. It also has a strong SEWA presence. Whenever there were news and rumours of looting and arson in other parts of the city, our Hindu and Muslim neighbours would get agitated and start throwing stones and sometimes, even small crude bombs, at each other. Whenever this started, some of us, would call out loudly: We are one, stop this, we have lived together for years, don't let others divide us. After a few minutes of shouting, invariably, the attack would stop.

Similarly, within my own community, I started a process of daily dialogue. Everybody was tense and insecure. They would often meet in groups and discuss the news from the rest of the city. While I realized it was important to allow people to give vent to their anger and anguish, I deliberately used these informal platforms for dialogue and diffusing tension. Once, I physically stopped a big man, in a very agitated state of mind, hell bent on taking revenge. Before I joined SEWA, I was so timid. SEWA has given me this courage and conviction.

- *Jaya Parmar, SEWA Health Team Member*

In my area, there are three Hindu shops. At one time, the boys of our area gathered and said, 'Lets burn these shops. My chali was next to one of the shops, so the boys said to some residents, "Let us make a hole in the wall so that we can get in and burn the shops". The residents said, "Talk to Rahimaben",. I said, "No. I will not allow it". I tried to reason with them. They got very angry. They said I was a traitor and that they would kill me. I was afraid that they might do so one day as I was walking down the street. I phoned the parents of some of the boys and told them that their sons had threatened me.. Then phoned the owners of the shops and told them we were trying to protect their shops but advised them to take away all their goods. That is how I saved three shops.

- *Rahimaben, garment worker, Secretary, SEWA*

Part of preventing violence was keeping our hearts and minds united. We felt strongly that unless we live and work together, removing communal prejudice from its very roots was impossible. In fact, our experience shows that the working class are generally not communal. They understand each other more than other groups in society . They also

realize that living and working together is inevitable. Where else can people go? Working people have little choice. And their daily economic struggles, keep them together to a considerable extent.

Namrata Bali, Secretary, SEWA recalls :

“On the way to Manilal Matthu’s Chaal in the Bapunagar area, we passed what was once Akbarnagar. There were burnt bags, utensils and pieces of glass scattered all around along with mattresses and children’s clothes. Two months earlier, there were families living here. The sight of such destruction shook us. We can’t even imagine what the residents must have faced when a large mob attacked them.

“For the last two days, some families have plucked up courage and have returned here for their daily chores and for bathing. Later they return to the relief camp in Aman Chowk. A few women were rolling agarbattis.

“82 year old Sabiroonisaben seemed to be guarding everyone in the chaali. She had a strong face and was acknowledged as a leader. ‘You all keep quiet. Let me speak first’, she instructed. We sat down next to her.

“We learned that she is originally from Jaunpur in U.P. She came to Gujarat at a very young age after her marriage. She said we all stay together here through both good and bad times. A few days before the violence, I made the youth staying here donate blood for a earthquake-affected patient. Every one’s blood is the same. But what has happened now? Where is humanity? What will be achieved by killing innocent people, young girls, and children?

I asked, ‘Sabiroonisaben, three or four families have returned to this chaal how many other families will return?’ Immediately she replied, ‘We are not rich enough to afford to go elsewhere. Our house is our only secure place. Two months without work is a long time. Initially we did not want to return. But we need work, income and security and a (police point nearby. It will take some time to trust and have faith in each other. Both Muslims and Hindus here are all daily wage workers. We have lived together for years and always will’.

Communication with our members and policy-makers

Through SEWA’s fortnightly newsletter, ‘Anasuya’ we kept both our members and the policy-makers informed of our peace and relief initiatives. Special issues titled “In the Relief Camps”, “Shantipath” and “The road to unity” brought out both our experiences and our firm belief that violence has never solved conflicts nor led to lasting peace and well-being of people. In fact, lead articles by Elaben Bhatt, our founder strongly condemned both the violence and communalism. These were reproduced in other Gujarati newspapers.

We also stressed that these communal divisions hurt informal workers the most and that employment – centred programmes, especially for the youth, must be immediately implemented as a peace initiative.

Our emphasis at this time was on communication with our members, other workers, local activists, with policy-makers and the public in Gujarat.

‘Anasuya’ helped to bind us together at a time when our unity was being challenged. It was the only regular channel of information focussing on the poorest of workers especially women and their efforts to stop the violence and unite all communities. It also served to remind us of the values like ‘Sarvadharmā Sambhava’ (or respecting all faiths equally) which hold us together.

First-hand surveys of the impact of violence.

The nature and scale of economic losses incurred by the citizens in Ahmedabad and rural areas, made us realize the need for an accurate and independent damage assessment of our members and of the informal economy in general. We needed the support of experts in the massive task of damage assessment.

One of our earliest initiatives in this regard was a survey of economic losses suffered by our members in the relief camps. Students of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) helped us in estimating the losses. As we moved in the neighbourhoods – Gomtipur, Rakhial, Saraspur, Odhav, Naroda, Dani Limda, Behrampura and more – the extent of the economic losses became evident.

For three months, the economic life of the city was severely disrupted. There were those who had lost their homes, businesses and work tools. Moreover, there were thousands of others who lost their daily wages or earnings because of fear, curfew, lack of transport as well as uncertainty of the markets. The situation of the informal sector workers, unlike the salaried class, was indeed grim.

Street vendors could not sell in the city's market nor could they move from one area to another, as they usually do. Hence, they lost daily income and also suffered losses from unsold rotting vegetables.

Further, the large wholesale markets at Kalupur and Jamalpur were under curfew, and so remained closed for several days. Fresh stocks of produce from rural areas could not reach the city either. Thus, with both supply and sale severely affected, feeding their families became a critical issue for streetvendors.

Similarly, rag pickers, cleaners and construction workers could not walk the streets or stand at the *naka* waiting for work at construction sites. As for head loaders of the main cloth market, they literally saw their source of livelihood go up in smoke, as the wholesale shops to which they have been linked for generations were completely gutted.

For home-based workers – bidi, agarbatti, garment, kite makers and others – as mentioned earlier, the supplies of raw materials stopped. With most contractors living in curfew areas or having fled to safety, there was no one to supply them these or collect their finished goods.

Thousand of workers lost their homes which are also their work-places. Most of the destroyed or damaged homes had been set alight and being small, close together and often containing inflammable work equipment and material, burned quickly. As we surveyed row upon row of burnt homes, the human tragedy unfolded before our eyes. No matter which community one speaks of, years of hard labour, careful savings for a few household items – the proud purchase of a ceiling fan, a TV set or work equipment like sewing machines to enhance income and productivity were gone. As worker after worker put it: 'We are back to zero again or even worse. Years of hard work have been wiped out.'

In Banasnagar of the Dani Limda area, we saw the rag pickers carefully salvaging materials from the cinders. Even a *balwadi* for the children was not spared. In Panna Estate, a sprawling industrial complex, half-burnt tendu leaves and piles of tobacco for bidis in a gutted shelter indicated the owner's occupation. In Saraspur, we saw mangled remains of sewing machines along with burnt onions and garlic and charred *laris* or push carts.

At Akbarnagar, the scene was surreal, to say the least. Hundreds of huts of plastic toy makers and recyclers (*pasti* workers) were razed to the ground. The fire had been so severe that even the ground, the grass and the trees nearby, were burned beyond recognition.

At a pavement settlement outside the Bapunagar General Hospital known as 'D-20' (it is an ESIC hospital and numbered accordingly), ten to fifteen dwellings were open to the sky. Many of the occupants made plastic toys and we could see multi-coloured, melted plastic everywhere.

It was clear that the toll on the economic lives of Ahmedabad's poorest of workers was enormous. The impact on the economic life in villages still remains to be computed. But in terms of income and work in Ahmedabad city the informal economy suffered losses amounting to at least Rs 179 crore in 40 days. Dr. Jeemol Unni of Gujarat Institute of Development Research (GIDR) helped us with these estimates.

Loss of income among informal sector workers in Ahmedabad during the period 28 February to 8 April 2002 (40 days)

Particulars	Daily earnings wages in Rs.	Workers	Percentage of workers affected	Economic loss crores (Rs)
Manufacturing				
Homebased	45	2,57,000	80 %	37
Workshops	90	62,000	60 %	23
Trade and Hotels				
Street vendors	72	1,27,000	60 %	22
Other trade Hotels	76	1,31,000	40 %	16
Construction				
Workers	42	1,40,000	80 %	20
Transport				
Autorickshaw, Pushcarts, Handcarts	76	1,12,000	70 %	26
Services				
Cleaning, unloading, housekeeping, loading, heeling,	46	2,01,000	90 %	35
Total		10,31,987		179

Damage to the Houses

The widespread damage and destruction of people's homes was a critical part of the economic losses suffered. We approached the city-based architect, Mr. Kirtee Shah of ASAG, and his team for technical assistance in assessing housing losses of our members. Mahila Housing Trust (MHT), SEWA's own housing team of young engineers, joined this effort.

Surveying and assessing homes in the tense environment was a challenge, and sometimes even dangerous. We went in teams of organisers and local leaders, aagewans, from both communities, accompanied by Mr. Shah and his team.

On one occasion our team was even attacked – our papers were snatched and stones were thrown on us. But still we persisted and more than 20000 houses were assessed in detail. We found that 15,000 members' houses have been damaged and looted and 6778 houses been totally destroyed. 24 large slums were razed to the ground. This proved to be very useful when we found the government's own assessment and consequent compensation to be incomplete and inadequate. This study of damage assessment for reconstruction of houses' was useful in providing a base for re-assessment and verification by the government.

Dialogue with the government

In the polarised and tense atmosphere of the past three months, maintaining our commitment to the poor – the worst victims of the violence – and continuing to maintain a dialogue with the government was not an easy task.

On the one hand, there was no denying that the government had failed in its primary duty to protect Gujarat's citizens. At the same time, we had to urge to our government for providing security and to develop programmes to help people re-build their lives. People's organisations like SEWA, NGOs and others were providing whatever services they could. But this could not be a substitute for the large-scale and long-term economic rehabilitation measures required. Only the government can do this. And if we did not contribute to this process, then how would our state's working people and others get back on their feet?

Thus, from the early days of the violence, we maintained the process of dialogue and negotiation. During the early days of the violence, Elaben contacted the Chief Minister of our state, appraised him of the poor conditions in the camps and urged him to intervene. There was a positive response that evening by the City Collector.

Twice the Prime Minister sought her briefings on the Gujarat situation. She was appointed to the state's relief and rehabilitation committee by the Governor of Gujarat. After the Prime Minister's visit to Gujarat, he asked Elaben to develop a programme for the rehabilitation of widows and orphans to be managed by SEWA.

We are ashamed that the Prime Minister of our country has to visit Gujarat at this time. What has happened in Gujarat is terrible. The country was divided in 1947. Today it is as if our hearts are divided.

If people of Gujarat get the government's support for security then is the normalcy far off? When will this happen? There can never be peace by making Muslims insecure. That is not nationalism. Why don't our political parties understand this?

We can breakthrough these layers of fear and distrust, if the government, both state and centre, assures law and order, which is their basic responsibility. Apart from this, it is necessary that everyone should be patient, restrained and controlled in his or her behaviour.

Peace committees are useful if they work concretely at ground level. If employment / work opportunities are developed at the earliest, relief packages are distributed as soon as possible and no haste is shown to close down the relief camps then people would once again start working. Also the real trouble makers must be arrested immediately. This is the government's responsibility. Once this is done, Gujarat will return once again to normalcy.

We have a special responsibility towards the youth in our society. They need direction and support. We need to provide employment-oriented skills training. Our technical institutes can

work three shifts. And there should be such technical schools in each ward of the city. With the help of our management institutes, linkages between skills training and employment and market opportunities must be established. Young people, all our people, need work. It is their main concern.

- Elaben Bhatt, Founder, SEWA, in her briefing to the Prime Minister

Rehabilitation of Widows and Orphans : ‘Shanta’

Rehabilitation of the most vulnerable – widows, orphans and children of single parents – has been planned in a comprehensive economic programme which we call ‘Shanta’ meaning ‘a woman in peace’. Working closely with the government of Gujarat, and in particular with the department responsible for women and children’s development, we have developed a long term plan.

For the 231 Widows identified so far integrated support is being provided for their livelihood, housing, insurance and health; special efforts are being done to help widows with mental trauma through professional care.

Orphaned children or those who have lost either of the parents will receive support for education, health care, health insurance and vocational training.

The surveys themselves are not easy to conduct as SEWA aagewans and organisers have to search for the victims, many of whom do not live in relief camps. Some have left the state. Others are with their families and are difficult to trace. And all the women are still in mourning. Most are still in shock. Our young organizers return with heart-rending experiences of all they’ve heard and seen.

Meanwhile, the issue of compensation and rehabilitation plans for the rest of the victims of violence is a major issue. We found that the damage assessment and compensation offered, the prime responsibility of the government, was very inadequate. In the affected areas, people would angrily show us their compensation cheques of a few hundred rupees when their losses were in the thousands.

In some areas, the assessment and compensation received was substantial, but uneven. Neighbours who’d suffered similar losses got varying amounts which were hard to explain.

We repeatedly presented our observations to the authorities. Finally, at a meeting organised by the PMO’s office, we spoke of the inadequate compensation received by victims of the violence.

The central government responded immediately by sending a senior officer, Mr Singh who spent a whole day going house-to-house with us. His report corroborated our experiences and resulted in a thorough re-verification of the state government’s assessment. 75 teams, including SEWA aagewans and organisers were involved in the survey on reassessment of housing losses undertaken by the collectors office.

In sum, starting with humanitarian initiatives for relief and then supporting rehabilitation of the riot-victims has engulfed almost all of SEWA and will continue for many more years to come. All members and organisers united to contribute in different ways. 250 members, 186 aagewans and 100 organisers joined hands for relief and rehabilitation work. Capacity-building also occurred as Subhadhraben, Sairaben and others helped our aagewans to run the relief activities themselves. There were times when it was impossible for organisers to

reach the camps because of violence and curfew. Our aagewans then took charge, courageously continuing the work.

This has been a period of severe tests and challenges. As an organisation we have to be cautious and ensure that the poisonous atmosphere from outside does not affect the unity of our members. They are both the source of the local leadership and are themselves the victims. Our aagewans and organisers are brave but work under constant threats. Several of them have to deal with their own families who had trouble understanding why they venture out into violence-affected areas and relief camps, at considerable risk to their personal safety.

Others asked why we didn't make public statements of condemnation – wasn't that the need of the hour? We felt restraint was the need of the hour in an atmosphere filled with hate and fury, politics and even criminal activity.

At times we felt isolated. At other times, the enormity of the task and the tremendous responsibility we felt towards our members helped us stay focussed.

At all times, the solidarity and the unity developed over the years not only helped by giving us access to all working people but also gave us the strength to face the task at hand. As a trade union, SEWA felt reassured by our members that the focus on work and income security was the right one. It was this that gave us access to all affected workers. In addition, child care helped us to get close to the families in the camps, as we took care of those dearest to them. The recent violence only underscored the need for work and social security both as a peace and rehabilitation measure and for the constructive development of all workers.

IV Our Tomorrow

We are still to comprehend the full impact of the violence of the last three months on SEWA, our members and all the citizens of our state. Even as we write, violence flares up periodically. Compared to the earlier months, normalcy has returned. But the sporadic outbreaks remind us of how fragile peace is in Gujarat.

Our state is polarised. There is hardly any middle ground. As we struggle to find that common space and the threads that bind us together, we feel disheartened. Healing and keeping all united will be a slow and difficult process.

While we have yet to understand all that has happened in this turbulent period, the one thing that is apparent is the complexity of the situation and the need to tread judiciously.

Earlier, we had mentioned the economic underpinnings of the social divide – declining employment opportunities but rising expectations and erosion of traditional ties like union strength among male workers have played their part.

In several areas, competing forces from capitalist interests to criminal elements added to the vitiated atmosphere. Land-grabbing and blatant looting of whatever little assets people had, added to their plight.

In an environment where peace making was impossible – especially in the initial weeks, could we have done more? We chose to work quietly among all affected communities. We saw that our first priority was to heal wounds and keep people together. SEWA leaders and especially Elaben, understood the tremendous expectations of us from all quarters. We felt the need to find the middle ground, serving the poorest and pressing for their needs and rehabilitation with the government which had lost credibility in the eyes of many people.

Sometimes it felt like an exercise in tight rope walking. Often we were misunderstood. As a labour union, our primary responsibility was to our membership. All our efforts were directed to ensuring their safety and well-being at all times. At the same time, we were committed to serving all poor families to the fullest extent possible.

Our experience pointed to the centrality of employment and livelihoods in all work with the poor, especially those in the informal economy. Thus livelihoods with social security formed the basis of both our relief and rehabilitation strategies. Through the violence, many women and girls came into contact with SEWA for the first time. They asked us for work and skills training to help them rebuild their lives. We are convinced that it is this approach which will lead to real and lasting peace. We need to use economic activities as the first and essential building block for constructive development. And this as well as all peace efforts must be led by women of all communities.

The women and workers of Gujarat have shown that we are not communal. In fact, we are the victims. SEWA members and leaders bore the brunt of the riots as they live in the areas where there has been maximum violence. They are in vulnerable positions during such times. They lost homes and all their possessions. They had to live with fear and constant tension. They suffered from lack of work and loss of income. Out of our total membership of 1,20,000 (a third is Muslim) in Ahmedabad, 40,000 have been in relief camps. And in the rural areas, where we saw widespread communal violence for the first time, 52,000 members were affected.

All these women are SEWA's union members, bank shareholders, depositors, borrowers, insurees, participants of several trainings, managers of their cooperatives, trained health workers, literacy teachers, video producers, local leaders and organisers. They are our sisters, Rahimas and Sharadas, Jetoons and Jayas, Sarojs and Salmas.

In spite of their vulnerable position, SEWA leaders took initiative to do their utmost to protect and reach the members and other affected people during the worst periods of violence. SEWA actively worked in five relief camps to serve their members and others in providing sanitation, healthcare, childcare and livelihoods. Our emphasis has been on long-term rehabilitation that includes Insurance services, rebuilding of houses, and livelihoods. We also briefed and put pressure on the government for adequate and proper rehabilitation packages and efficient implementation mechanisms.

In SEWA's fortnightly in Gujarati, 'Anasuya', we condemned the violence unequivocally and urged the government to restore law and order in the city. We also constantly reported the situation in the camps where we worked.

SEWA was in touch with the administration. Elaben's two meetings with the Prime Minister were crucial in reflecting the reality of the situation in Gujarat. We thought it wise to keep away from the mass media in such a turbulent, vitiated, and complex atmosphere. We chose to communicate through our own medium 'Anasuya'. Our writings were reproduced in some newspapers.

SEWA's messages also reached the outside world through our Resolution to IUF.¹ Elaben's interview in the Times of India described the rehabilitation needs of the victims. Her appeal for peace on Zee TV was well received. She drew the attention of CII², the government and the public through the CNBC TV Channel about the very negative impact of violence on the workers in the informal economy.

What is significant is the fact that SEWA kept on providing services to the victims in spite of the violence and curfew. This was possible because of the decentralised way that SEWA works: through Bank Sathis, childcare and health workers, union organisers, trade representatives, board members and aagewans. 87 percent of our staff is from the working class and live in the affected areas. They already were acceptable in their areas. With concrete support from SEWA's Main Office, they could work effectively. They were like small lamps that spread the light of hope during those dark days and nights.

The question that faces us is how often must we have to bear the brunt and suffer? How long will the small lamps flicker against the strong evil winds? How many more times will our homes and livelihoods be destroyed?

We have seen that while communal violence may have its origins in the religious, political and economic factors, the end result is the same – destruction of life and livelihoods of the poor. So every time such a situation occurs, SEWA has to begin afresh – we almost begin at the beginning. Although we are well aware of the dangers of the communal divide, there is no way our trade union, SEWA, alone can defend or protect us from the direct or side effects of what is happening in the minds of the society at large, in the general economy and in the halls of the Indian Parliament. This makes our task infinitely more difficult. The battle for

¹ IUF – International Union of food, agricultural, hotel, restaurant, catering, tobacco and allied workers, associations, of which SEWA is an affiliate for years.

² CII – Confederation of Indian Industry

economic and social uplift of the working poor, especially women is becoming tougher than before.

Communal violence leaves the women bewildered because they lose out for reasons beyond their own or SEWA's control. So, while what triggered a particular incident may be new, (this time an attack on a train, last time on a cow or kite-flying fights at other times) the pattern of devastation remains the same. Relief and rehabilitation needs also remain the same. We do realise that SEWA's relief and rehabilitation efforts have limitations.

The real task for tomorrow is the rehabilitation of " hearts and minds" of getting people to live and work together in the same occupations and to study together in the same schools. We have to organise and join hands in the same organisation. That is the India to which we belong. That is our tomorrow.