

## Anubandh Conversation

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Renanaben (President of SEWA): Welcome and thanks for coming on a Sunday morning. I see many people have Elaben's book in their hands. Today we are not going to have a lecture or presentation; we thought we would have a discussion on the book. You have the book and read the book, and some are going to share about the book. Elaben has been writing this book for 3 years...actually writing the book, but many, *many* years for the ideas have been thought out. If you've read the book you know there's a concept and a field level study and she's written what she's seen in the field, what SEWA has experimented with, and she has brought out the concept and I'm not going to say what's in the book but just that's its been three years in the writing based on many years of Elaben's experience. We're very fortunate to have Sreenivasan Jain with us. He's the managing editor for NDTV and has a wonderful program on Saturday's, which I strongly recommend, called 'Truth vs. Hype'. He's going to facilitate today's discussion. And there's Elaben-when you don't need to say anything about someone you just say that she needs no introduction, but I think this case is true. She is the founder of SEWA and the many SEWA institutions and the SEWA movement and is at present is a member of The Elders which is a group thinking of the world as a village so welcome Elaben.

I also think SEWA has a gift for you.

Sanjay Kumar (Director of SEWA Bharat): I would like to welcome you with a small gift handmade by our members.

Renanaben (President of SEWA): I can tell you it is a new product from our members. It is linen. Linen clothe from Bihar. These are made by our cooperative members in Bhagalpur. Now may I hand over to Sreenivasan Jain

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Thank you very much indeed, Renana, for asking me to do this and thank you all for coming. This is a slightly intimidating challenge for me as a journalist...this is somewhat different. One of the reasons being Elaben is like family to me; she's been very closely associated to my parents for many years. She's known me since I was much smaller than I am now so I've grown up seeing her in our house, visiting her in Ahmedabad, so it's kind of strange moderating a session with her, but also quite wonderful. Something that happens when you know someone quite intimately; you don't understand fully the work that they do. There was a general sense growing up that she was doing a great job with SEWA mobilizing workers and receiving a lot of praise within India and abroad. But it was only later as one reaches adulthood especially with the work I'm doing now, where I travel outside of the city and see another India do you realize that the work SEWA is doing in India is so important.

So I was quite fortunate when Renana mentioned this book to me and sent to me a few weeks ago and in my travels I was able to read it. I'm sure some of you or most of you have read it. I'll just briefly mention what the book is about and then I'll open it up. Now *Anubandh* from what I understand in the book, anu means to follow that's a Sanskrit word apparently. And bandh means to bring close and what I think Elaben has tried to do is to distill the value of SEWA in something which can become a wider ideology or can become a wider practice that can be taken across the canvas and not just in the areas that they're working in but can be adopted by governments, or by society, as a whole. She summarizes it as this idea of 100-mile concept that most of the basic needs can be available in 100-mile radius will make a more sustainable living. The five areas that she says are important to the livelihoods are food, clothing, housing, health, education and financial services. Now this is a Gandhian idea that has its origins in Gandhi's belief of self-sustaining communities but of course people in India laugh at Gandhi's ideas today. He has gained a certain amount of popularity in the West however, where you often hear about especially in the context of food, there is much about how the food is locally sourced and there's a premium attached to that. Some nearby farm makes the tomatoes, the chicken is from somewhere else, and there's an emphasis on that because it's supposed to be fresher and have less environmental impact. But Elaben in the Indian context is bringing it not only as a lifestyle choice, she's talking about it in a much more integral way, linked to livelihood, linked to security. Now of course this is a challenging idea, that everything you want is available within a 100 mile radius and I think that this challenge is what the book sets out to address and to that end, SEWA conducted a survey in a number of villages in Gujarat to see whether this idea can actually work or not. And the findings of this survey, just to summarize, there was a time when there was a greater adherence of local and that has slowly changed. For instance, the food crops that were grown there were locally grown and consumed. But over a period of time as patterns changed, as you went to cash crops, and towards monoculture we have of wheat and rice, that is started to break down. So a lot of the food locally is not actually consumed, locally. And that is especially true with clothing—even in some of the areas that were cotton-growing regions—that used to have a tradition of wearing cotton; it is now all synthetic material that is bought from other areas. When it come to education and health, again, the survey found the presence of schools and a presence of health centers, but what was actually being taught there was not very useful that the knowledge was not very practical or useful. Banks, again, she stresses the importance of financial services, were present, but she found that there was very little use of banks with people depositing money and so on. Most villagers were deeply in debt. And most of them required cash to service that debt for one reason or another...it could be for agricultural reasons, it could be for personal reasons, so there was very little usage of that. There was not enough being done to provide the financial literacy for people to actually use banks, as they should be.

I actually read this book pessimistically. You set it up as a challenge, but reading it there was no clear sense on seeing how this could be sustainable. The book describes SEWA's initiatives to create more of these sustainable models, for example

what it does for financial literacy. But it still seems extremely challenging to consider in today's India with the economy that we have, that increasingly stresses economic modes of production and distribution. I could see clearly a case for food on how that could be locally produced and consumed, but for a lot of the other things, that we use, whether it's a cellphone for example, which has become an important tool for communication, or so many other things, how it is feasible. So let me actually begin by asking, you that. Where and how do you think this could be something that—I know you say that not everything can come within a 100 mile radius—but what are the ways that you think this could actually work. Or did you come across an example, where it was actually possible to do in a more realistic way.

Elaben: I also like you feel one day I am very enthused to see some things done by the youth that is very positive and very thoughtful. And as I read the newspapers you feel so agitated. It feels like a big challenge, but we need a new vision. We've gone too far, we have lost the balance. I have seen villages from far away those that have safe drinking water and good schools they are not influenced by outside those villages that have maintained local village forests and culture according to the tradition. They have kept the traditional form of husbandry; those cattle are taken care of so there you see this primary need has been taken care of.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Why did you give this example of this village?

Elaben: Those traditions that they have been maintained from parents to parents. Like how to clean and store the water, how to harness it. It was not new that someone from the outside has gone there and taught them how to do it, it was traditional. So many of the things, when they were afraid of drought the elders brought seeds together and threw them but that was the traditional practice to just throw the seeds and whatever grows then they remember that in this soil this area, this particular seeds are fruitful. So this how these are on their own, going on. Not that they don't listen to radio, it doesn't influence them in any negative way. They learn, they also sing those modern cinema songs, which they heard on the radio. And TV, they find it boring...

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Except NDTV of course...

Elaben: These villages are a bit far mainly the farmers have been maintained.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): So it is a challenge. I think some people have prepared thoughts on the book to speak. I request we try and keep it as brief as possible so that we get the maximum variety of perspectives. Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma is here with us. So if you'd like to set the ball rolling.

Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma (former Gen. Sec. of SAARC): I find that it condenses Elaben's long experiences almost half a century experiences and this is not only in the domain of the social field but I see it as it—I mean sitting in Delhi and being

preoccupied with other things--that it is the core of Indian society and the core of the political economy. The women in the villages, poor artisans, self-employed home-based workers, and diverse village communities who—I want to quote and why I want to quote is because her words are from the depth of truth. And as Renanaben has said she's been working on it for the last three years, it seems that every word in the book, she has weighed and written, it's really a delight to read, it's like a poem because whatever the word is written as it conveys much more. So about the communities, I'd like to say "who possess a rich knowledge of the natural world, practice sustainable harvesting, harness great skill in manufacturing, and produce enough to supply one's needs. And eventually their handiwork returns to nature where it came from". This comprises what she feels about it and also I find the way she describes it as the "lengths of interconnectedness to a sense of wholeness". And this is where I also feel that our language puts it very modestly, very simply, but the translation is so complex and difficult to convey it requires so many words to convey. On the one hand she gives a brief etymology of how the word was first used and this is also a predicament of culture, that wisdom of our traditional inheritance is not intelligible to those who see it from the outside. But Elaben's extraordinary ability to put things simply, and yet wholly is the motif of this book. I feel that the 100 miles community is actually a solution to the challenges ranging from climate change to societal unrest, and the largely interacted problems of a globalized economy with unsustainable production, distribution without equity, and rapacious or devouring consumption. All these things have been discussed in haloed conferences and they come up with things that are not very clear ideas and the more you read, the more you get the feeling that they've given up. Whereas if you read this book, you find solutions coming from the roots, from the bottom, and they make sense. Gandhi ji talked about this 100 years ago. And you read this and you see the interconnectedness across a century to manifest itself in this book. There is specific words that she uses, like when she is describing traditional craft and it has really struck me how through SEWA they were able to find exquisite art from people who are on the fringe of existence and produce excellent embroidery, that she describes in the book also that they can do embroidery and get water. So she says, "traditional craft are not our past, they are also our future." I find these words are very relevant to our present situation. And she goes on to say, "Our community is both global and local and it includes nature".

So I have quotations and quotations, but I want to emphasize like she says, "We as consumers have made the choice. Our reasons may be curiosity or status or price or quality. One can say that these are market forces at work, but these shifts in the market are a consequence of our choices and our decisions." Now this puts it in grassroots level what I think 4 climate change reports have said that men's actions influences climate. The book, very concisely, gives the examples of how it works. She has brought out in the villages how each of these 6 requirements can be met by local effort and can be productive. So I want to contrast this with a recent comment made by a Chinese doctor, about Chinese development, which the West gives as a success story, he says "It is already too late for the economy. China has too many empty homes and its banks have too much bad debt. A crisis cannot be averted." This is the

state we have come to with our unconscionable pursuit of the macroeconomy and overconsumption. What she's saying resonates across the world and her profound and basic commitment to women's empowerment, which is the most inspiring because the way she brings out how she gets these women together and how SEWA has done this. And these whole series of programs, like the management school and the building cooperatives, and RUDI, and of course microfinance which was first started by SEWA. She says the "spirit of cooperation is just as likely to lead us to profits as a dose of healthy competition". And this brings out the dimension that these women work together in the cooperative bank and most of them all of them pay off their debt and come back and get fresh debt and then keep working and the stories are very concise.

I know I am tempted to go on and on. The book is like in a sense a Gita—today's Gita that explains our situation, our inheritance, and our compulsions to what we should do. The national sample survey, which just came out yesterday, says that 10% of the bottom's assets are worth just 290 Rs. And the average value in the villages could be 25,000 Rs. But this is the way the poorest of the poor are, whereas the richest of the rich their assets are 40 times, 50 times. This is where we have come today and so I think I'll stop here. The way she writes there is a silent inspiration—not to use hyperbole and over exaggerate but it is difficult to speak about her work without getting overwhelmed with excitement.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Great, thanks. We also have Mr. Harsh Singh from UNDP

Harsh Singh (UNDP): I'll speak today in my personal capacity as a small author who did some similar work on Bihar on a similar topic actually. This is very clear, India is growing very fast without the kind of movement she has talked about in all areas and local synergy and energy, and mass poverty in India will not work. And that is a truism. And what exactly should be the model for that? I'll come from the Bihar angle because I'm from Bihar because I come from Bihar and have worked in Bihar. This is a truism where local development has to take place where landlessness is 60-70%. I came from the view that from the local areas also there has to be a view of reorganization to allow this 60-70% of people who are landless to also get some land and to get some stake. Basically I saw that poverty removal you just don't need one thing, but a package of three things. You need assets, access to assets, otherwise if you do not have access to assets you grow poorer as the economy grows. When land becomes costlier because of development they get evicted, so they become poorer. So access to assets in a growing economy is key. Access to human development services, health and education and financial services. And then access to livelihood activities. These are the three necessary things and we need an approach that combines these three in some measure and that can only be done through local development.

But for Bihar what I thought was there are lots of villages that are very small—200 people, 500 people. And one was wondering whether facilities like school, where

there are teachers there but they run away. Similarly, higher level health centers. So the point I'm trying to make is a bit of reorganization in the local economy needs to take place towards creating habits, which are around 20,000-30,000, 5,000 families, which can become a viable unit. And that happens you know, if you see on the roadside on the national highways you see these small Kasbahs. They grow with a lot of dynamism but there is no policy support, there is nothing deteriorating into squalor. If we had a system of encouraging that kind of development through a good school, through a good hospital, and the people who own land are incentivized to parcel pieces of land for landless people to come in. There is FAO evidence that says—they have a program called the Home and Garden Plot Program—and they say 380 sq. of land is able to provide sustenance to people equal to 220 days of wage labor. You put in a hut, you put in some cows, and you grow your vegetables. And it has been seen that that Home and Garden Plot has been extremely successful and also very productive. For instance, in China or Russia have large amount of production of vegetables. And that's happening. And the thought that I had was that some of these some of these existing Kasbahs, the government needs to have a scheme to be able to expand in an orderly way, where even poor people like migrants who come from Bihar have the money to invest properly. So can we as India develop the concept of a habitat, as I've called it, which is very organized, very close to rural areas, some amount of people who cannot do farming can move to that habitat, so agriculture becomes adjusted, people who have already moved to urban areas can move back because urban life is very costly. And yet there was a survey from Bihar from migrants that said they needed modern marketplaces, modern entertainment. So, my vote is that we need a model of habitats, that it is neither rural nor urban, but having the best of best worlds. So, these were my thoughts. And definitely we need to work on local economy. Panchayat was supposed to do that, but it's gotten lost in many parts.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Thank you, thank you very much. Would you [Elaben] like to respond? And then we can get more speakers.

Elaben: We can get more speakers. I'd like more contribution.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Ok maybe one more speaker. So there are some college students who have prepared to speak. So let's of one of you speak—is Swadha here?

Swadha (student): I'm Swadha I've been associated with SEWA for 3 years now--this was 2013 when I joined the youth mentorship fellowship where students from Delhi University and students from SEWA's vocational schools were brought together so that we could exchange our knowledge base, our values, and belief systems, and if we could find plausible ways to reconstruct their lives in a more meaningful fashion if that was possible. So the fellowship followed the very principle of *Anubandh*, which is interconnectedness and mutual relatedness. When I read the book and read the title, it was the first time I came across the term "Anubandh". As a social sciences student, my vocabulary is set by the course that modernity has set. So in this

context, I would really like to thank Elaji for giving us a term and bringing it back in our imagination, which is loaded with so much creative energy. Language is one of the least things that modernity has changed, but it has changed how we produce and how we consume and how we dispose. The times we are living in are definitely marked by conspicuous levels of consumption and we've blurred the distinction between our need and our greed, something that Gandhiji cautioned us a long time ago and Elaji reminded us about it in her book. She very deeply charted out these six needs and the very core of the book, which on the one hand I feel is very simple and the other very revolutionary, but definitely not impossible to achieve, to realize these 6 needs within 100 mile radius of the community you're living in. So *Anubandh* has recorded the first hand experiences of SEWA women who now feel empowered, socially and financially. And I think this has happened because the model which Elaji and SEWA has presented makes the project of their liberation very intimate to themselves. They are using their traditional methods to uplift themselves. What I was particularly struck by was the financial literacy services, which are offered to women, because they learn how to save, they learn how to borrow, and how to repay, and have a sense of their needs. And in fact, financial services is just one of the miniscule services the book has to offer. It has multitudes of insights. I had the opportunity of growing up in a village and moving to a metropolitan area like Delhi, so I've seen the changes that have occurred over time and I think it's very relevant to go back to where we were. Because today the type of lifestyle that we lead creates more problems and our own time is wasted trying to recorrect it. So I think on a personal level we need to change and take those changes to the value systems of our community. The book was a great learning experience and I hope it was for everyone else as well.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Now you must speak.

Elaben: Thank you. You are all great people and I feel that what I wanted to say I already put before you. The most important that this idealistic or practical concept can have more and more contributions to it and I don't want to see that it stays just with SEWA or a book but let it spread. *Anubandh* is a word you know the Sanskrit word it says the actions without unrelating to the consequence to others. So in the Gita when it is describing this is what it says about it. This word was first used when Gandhiji was thinking of new education and had the first conference on what kind of education would it be when the country is free: will it be the same education? And it was translated into Hindi and this is when the word *Anubandh* came about. Gandhiji never used it but it is not new, it has been going on for years. And it is used in the context of thinking. Think correlatedly and then act thoughtfully, so think, think, think. And today, the situation is that there is so much bombardment from outside of all kinds to do this, to do this, you know, how to organize your child's birthday party, or what to wear, or what to consume. Everything is told to you—including education and research systems. So in that sense, it becomes more and more relevant to act thoughtfully. But if you don't think then how are we going to act? And that thinking on your own is being not done and becoming less and less as time goes on. Then it was Gandhiji who talked about

thinking and I found a way to think. I'll tell you a story. When Renanaben came to SEWA first, she was working with the women and she was asked, "What do you do here?" and I heard her say, "I try to help women think" and to think that is where we are stuck. I was thinking about this, "how to think?" So I came to the conclusion you have to come to conclusions. You know, I drink a cup of coffee, I put some sugar in it, some milk in it, and have a glass of water. How does it impact me? How does it the society? And how does it impact the use? We do think about it, but separately. How do we think about it as a correlation? Interconnectly? And if we do that and our education system helps us to think on our own, then God has given everyone a conscience, so then we are able to think rationally, and right and then act properly and meaningfully. And our basic dharma, or culture, or religion, they all say how to act with a positive impact. So this was the whole purpose. I had another publisher to tell you the truth. We couldn't agree with each other to print this book, simply because that publisher, an international publisher, who was not ready to accept *Anubandh* as the title.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): What did he want?

Elaben: The key words, you know, if you press some button, 'figures', and 'poor' this and that. So I purposefully wanted this word, 'Anubandh', to be used by everyone and there is no translation into English of this term, so that is what I wanted to say about *Anubandh*.

You know, what the other incident that struck me the most was I was getting more and more influenced from my SEWA sisters and the work, but I happened to be at a conference where there were farmers from Ghana that said that "What we produce, we do not eat. What we eat, we do not produce". These are the actual words. So I asked them, "What do you actually produce? What is your staple food?" they said "Chicken and tomato". And I asked again, "What do you eat now?" and they said, "The same. But frozen chicken from the store and tomato puree from a tin". Then I asked, "What do you do? Have you lost your land?" "No we have our land but we are growing for export". Then I was really shocked that day. Was it going to happen the same way in my country? I couldn't bare the idea. That was another push that I wanted to share.

Then I wanted to write. Someone was asking me, "What about the journey of the book, how did it come?" You know, I said, "Writing does not come to me easily and I have my great assistants around in SEWA so I could do it." The earlier book I wrote I was asked to write, this book I wanted to write. But before this I wanted to write about poverty, that poverty is violence and violence with consent from society. But there were some constraints within me, so then I said that we should think of an answer to the poverty. And this was the most common problem I see—as starvation and violence. So if that is thing and yet we are producing and consuming more and more then worthless things we consume. Then that is not the right way to go ahead. So I am cannot worry about the whole thing. But it has to be resolved through work—not charity—can we not, in the whole world, do that basic thing? So, then all



these years, the SEWA experiences, my colleagues and members, we had no blueprint no reference point, but as it came from the women, we developed different answers to self-reliance and the thinking was always there. So then we tried to develop all types of things that I've included and then more and more I gained more confidence and that made me write this book.

And lastly, I also realized the solutions that we talk about are not in isolation. When we have the human being in the center, then we have the right thinking. Integratedly, I learned that there is no answer ever in isolation and that brought me to *Anubandh* and the image of an ocean and oceanic circles. If I do something or drop something then there is a circle. If my neighbor does the same and my left neighbor does it so the circles spread and sprawl all the way to Mexico. And similarly what they do their circles reach to me, with friction and without friction. So why not I pour some sweetness...some honey, some nectar into it. But if I pour something evil or poison, then it will spread poison. So how we are—whether we like it or not—are connected. We have the only source of water from rainwater. Is there any source of water? Underground water is where we have storage. We all share the same water and the same water storage and the land which we grow our food. So the basic thing is let us think and relate to others with Mother Nature, with society, and with us. We are not alone. That is the background of the book.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): On the topic of connectedness, before we go on can we turn off our cell phones? I know we are all connected but perhaps we can be connected a little locally. So we have some speakers from SEWA as well who have come with their comments. I have two names here: Sanchita?

Sanchita: The best part of Elaben's book is that it compels you to think and think very deeply and sometimes your heart joins you in this thought and since this book will stay with me it can be read several times. There's a particular place where I stopped and read it and read it. It says that "Development is not a project, it is not about building systems and institutions. It is not even about economics. In the end it is about restoring balance between the individual, the community, and the environment". I think we have lost this definition or we have to believe in this definition. *Anubandh* has been explained so well and our 6 needs: food, clothing, and shelter and then education, primary financial services, and primary healthcare all within the reach of 100 miles. It also builds an equitable society and many women give up on education or have access to health services because of the distance. It also talks about 100 mile community has a human skill to allow voices to be heard and problems to be surmountable. People, products, news and knowledge circulate easily through this area and builds social capital, which is very important for us. It reduces the distance between consumers and producers as well as producers and local, natural resources. Now we have several continents in between the producer and the consumer. I was watching TV once and there was one whole seller of grapes who said "I sell it and export it, but I never consume it because there is a lot of pesticides directly on fields". So he doesn't bother. *Anubandh* says that we can

rebuild the relationships between humans and nature across the world. It talks about education, skill. It is true that the education and skills that are given to the children do not allow the children be retained in their villages. So they go to a next level of development, they go to another state; they go abroad and feel “developed”. This book also makes us more responsible. And Elaben also says, “I suggest we begin by building an active relationship with the world around us”. I think this is very important because all of us have become consumers, we don’t believe in relationships. How do we relate to each other? How do we relate to the community? How do we relate to nature? So, there are a lot of young people and all of us here, should be very conscious with what we do, what kind of food we eat, what we where, and the objects we surround ourselves in our daily lives. It does not only reflect our own values but also actually the values of our society. It is a two way process. Elaben says, “Let us build 100 mile communities that are interlinked and lively. Let us not impose systems and practices in the name of modernization on people if it leads them to constantly disadvantaged and feeling vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. How can this be progress? When one person benefits at the expense of another?” So we really need to think and think whether we are progressing or whether we are harming. Thank you.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Can we get one of the students to speak now, Bani? And also if you or any of the other speakers want to frame some questions for Elaben at the end of your talk, then please do.

Bani (Student): Good afternoon everyone, I am Bani, a final year student of political science at Miranda House and also a proud fellow of the SEWA Youth Connect, as Swadha has mentioned. So now before I start talking about how wonderful the book, *Anubandh*, is, if I may take the liberty, I want you to consider this: all 20-somethings here vision ourselves with a perceived security when asked ‘where do you see yourself 2 decades from now’. And 2 decades from now, we definitely vision ourselves with a secure job, a comfortable household, and comfortable state of being. But when we are asked ‘what we’re doing about it’ where we’re trying to de-jumble the tangled webs of our careers, relationships, etc. Now what I want you to think is that once you reach that state of security, would you have the courage to leave that state of security and step into the phase you’re in right now again? Well, Elaben did. Now, take a moment to appreciate her courage. We have with us, Elaben, one of the 25 greatest living Indian legends.

Now while I was reading *Anubandh*, one of the lines that really caught my attention was when she begins as simple solutions can solve complex problems, “A simple idea can grow organically if it’s understood, accepted, and owned by the very people whose lives it influences.” Now India today is one of the fastest growing startup hubs in the world and given the governments induction of the startup India action plan, I wonder what that acceleration is really going to be. So startups today are not just the inward way of fiscal incentives for the youth, but they’re also the most viable ways of finding sustainable solutions to complex problems. Now what I want you to do is to go back in time, 40 years back in time, to 1972, and draw parallels

with startups today. This will make you appreciate the powerful vision Elaben had back in time where she started a cooperative bank that is regulated by the RBI (Reserve Bank of India) today. Now when I read *Anubandh*, I also realized that it is trying to break the shackles of the urban labyrinth that we're all stuck in.

It also touched upon the essential aspect of sustainable living and that we have to build active relationships with not only the world around us, but also the universe around us. *Anubandh* encouraged me to delve deep into resonate thinking. It stated, "If we consider ourselves as essential, we must also not dismiss the fact and the work of others around us." It made me dwell upon the idea of finding solutions to everyday problems and that is even at the inception of where my startup lies. If we read *Anubandh*, we also realize that there has been a sensitizing of work done in terms of informal employment. We know that the government has a lot of schemes and plans that are done for the rural, however they do not reach the poor. If they never reach the poor, the poor will never know about their assets, and if they never know about their assets, they'll never be able to build upon their assets. So what makes sense to me more than anything else, is the book lays stress on uniting communities to serve a sustainable model of development and what it promotes is, as I'll call as 'tacit consent', in the words of the famous political thinker, John Locke. So living with *Anubandh* also starts with a line that says, the recipe of 100 mile communities may sound impractical but we must also keep in perspective that the all of the other recipes for KFC were rejected before it became a billion dollar company.

So I'd like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude of having the opportunity to play an active role through SEWA and to Sanjay sir for allowing me to voice my opinion and thank you Elaben for inspiring us everyday to make the world a better place to live.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Wonderful, can we have Prerna?

Prerna (student): So I am another mentor and I am grateful to be sitting in front of you all and giving my opinions. So frankly, I am not giving my opinions about this book. I actually have learned *a lot* from this book and thank you for giving us the opportunity to read your journey and about how you started. So before I tell you about this book, I'd like to mention two videos I came across a few days back. One was related water wives. It was about a village where men usually marry three or four women so that those women can go fetch water from a well 50 kilometers away. Another video was related to the relationship between a father and daughter—and showed the fear of the daughter losing her father due to suicide for a bad harvest. So while reading this book, somewhere in my mind I had those stories and somehow I was able to connect those two stories with this book. Not because it was a mirror to those villages and villagers, but because it somehow reflected the lives of those people; how they are living without those basic amenities. They were living in that fear to what these issues. What if I don't get water for another day? What if they don't get food? What the harvest is not good? What if there are

droughts? So all of these things were in my mind when I was reading this book, but with that this book was also reflecting the solutions. It was not just about the lives of those people, but it was about the solutions that these people actually took—that these villagers took a step to fight against the destiny that they were provided with. So apart from that this book was for me was not just about sitting and protesting against the governments and against the laws, but taking an initiative for ourselves. This book is all about Gandhian principles. I just wanted to quote one of the lines of Gandhi to “be the change you want to see in the world” and this book is actually the change we all can be in our society, first as an individual and then we can bring change in the society. Thank you.

But before I end this, I want to mention one of the many beautiful lines I came across in this book, one that I was actually stuck: “If the role of education is to prepare one to become an informed and productive member of society then we need to open up our view to include our type of learning in childhood and adulthood. We need to embrace the multifaceted nature of learning in order to break down the divide between the educated and illiterate—a divide that assumes the superiority of one over the other. It is a shame that so many of our educated people are unemployed and unproductive, it is equally shameful that productive, working people are not educated. Just a small shift in our thinking can make a difference” And, friends, I believe a difference can be *the* difference.

I do have one question for you: you went to those villages and took a survey and these villagers are accepting the modern technology but they are missing traditional culture. So, when you were taking that survey and talking to those villagers what was their reaction? Did you see sadness? How did they welcome you? Was their happiness? Was there fear?

Elaben: They had not yet reached that state of sadness but they were confused. Because on one side their children were educated and using some new technology or that they were getting their children’s clothing sold on by a bicycle walla so she feels happy that all the shopkeepers came to her doorstep but then she thinks ‘its so expensive. A child’s garment is just as expensive as my pump it costs 100 Rs. What am I doing?’ So this type of confusion is very common. But they do repent often when asked about life 30 years back, they had lost some of the recipes and lost some of the products, such as those coarse grains that they used to eat and so much use of money today. And therefore the most common finding was in rural areas; they suffer from high indebtedness, very high. So whenever they have better harvest of crop, it all goes for repaying their debt. So they’re not able to generate their assets, particularly in their own name. So SEWA bank has a program of redeeming old debts and recovering those mortgaged lands and they put them in the name of the woman as an asset, so that has been very fruitful and effective for the whole family. Earlier the men used to object, but later the husband would come back and accept that. So that’s how I came also to learn that it is possible---that it is possible to regain assets and be in the name of the woman So there has been sadness, not yet, but confusion and heavy nuance

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Lovely, very good. So let's get one of the SEWA leaders to speak, Sanjay?

Sanjay Kumar (Director of SEWA Bharat): So addressing this first to dear Elaben. I've been listening to you since I first joined the SEWA movement in 1999, I've read some of your work and articles, and I've also been fortunate to spend time with you traveling to Bihar a few years ago. In all the readings and interactions with you, I found the words so simple and yet so powerful. Your words are always organic, interconnected, and always push me to think beyond the dictionary meaning. And I always enjoy doing that because the hidden meaning of words is always very meaningful and inspiring. The words you speak and use in your writing are a true mirror to your personality, your ideals, and your practice. *Anubandh* to me is not just a book, but also a message to each of us to stop, reflect, and start a dialogue within our own minds and within the communities. You rightly pointed out in the *Anubandh* while asking everyone to build a fair and equal society and I quote, "How is it progress if one person benefits at the expense of another?" as Sanchitaji already mentioned. I think this could be potentially a great question for any theorist or practitioner or any economist who is crazy about numbers and outputs and do not believe in investing in human capacity, which is essential for equality and peace in our country and society. I'm sure that this book will inspire many to stop and think again the way everyone understands development and progress. I was personally touched by all of the statements by villagers, which you have woven so beautifully with your thoughts. Those statements made me sad but they are so powerful that I read them many times to visualize their meanings and effects. I would like to quote two of them, those are in Gujarati and are so meaningfully captured: "Death by learning hard lessons, that is the life of the farmer". The second one, a landless laborer can face that her daughter brings her school lunch home with her, "We may wake up hungry, but God don't let us go to bed hungry". My Gujarati is not good, but the way you have connected these feelings and statements with your thoughts is something really powerful and to me poverty and inequality are the biggest challenges for us today, which we have created in the name of progress and modernization, other issues are byproducts and symptoms. I'd like to end by quoting page 11, "In my mind Gadhiji's message about nonviolence was a message against poverty because poverty is nothing but a form of violence perpetuated by the consent of society. It is time to take ownership of the role we play in perpetuating poverty and see ourselves as an integral part of the world, and the world as an essential part of us. We are bound to each other and to the world around us, some bonds are visible and some are not, but if we cared to look closely, the correlated nature of our lives becomes apparent." *Anubandh* is about gaining awareness of our place in the world. I am sure, Elaben, your teachings will not end here and will inspire our policy makers and implementers, older and younger generations, to translate *Anubandh* into action. Thanks for all your inspiring words and actions.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Thank you. So last we have Queenie.

Queeny: I am Queenie and I am also a mentor in SEWA's Youth Connect and I am a student at Jawaharlal Nehru University. This is a book that I actually needed to inspire me and it basically revolved around issues that have been predominant in my own thoughts for a very, very long time. Since I come from JNU, a very strong ideological conflict between the socialist principles and capitalism, which has taken predominance in the world all over. During my two-year stay in JNU, I started to question the socialist principles because of the practices of the Communist parties in JNU functioned and because of the way they publish their literature. So I am very grateful to *Anubandh* because it let me have a belief in the socialist principles again and the idea of the proletariat having a share in the ownership in running an organization and therefore benefitting is very laudable. Since I am a person who supports the welfare orientation and socialist principles, I was stuck in a dilemma if they are actually being followed by the parties that inherently stand for the ideologies but do nothing on the ground. It was a very enlightening moment for me.

And the other thing—so I come from Punjab and I've spoken to a lot of farmers from Punjab who face a similar difficulty in terms of getting their grains directly to the market, since there is a mediator, who intervenes in this process. The government is ideally supposed to procure the grains from the farmers but since FCI is already loaded with the grains, there are a lot of bureaucratic hurdles. The farmers therefore neither give the grains to the government, because the government is not procuring it—I understand the problems the government is facing because every single grain is getting rotten inside FCI—and the farmers cannot give it to the consumers, so it's like they are producing in abundance. There are a lot of structural problems in Punjab. And the mediator's role in Punjab does not let the farmers give the products directly to the consumers because if they refuse to do that then the mediator refuses to procure the farmer's grains. So the farmer cannot run of the risk of selling it directly to the consumer in fear of not having anyone purchase it. So I particularly want to ask you, did you confront any such challenge when you were organizing the bazaar where the female farmers were directly selling it to the consumer? And I also was particularly inspired by the line, "To stage a protest is not enough. Laws do not change overnight. You need a constant driving which is viable and sustainable". And that does not happen—I don't see that anywhere. I've spoken to the JNU vice-president, the JNU president who are very strong supporters of the socialist ideology, but I don't see that they are actually bothered by the problems on the ground. They have not done anything or got aligned with any organizations or NGO's that are going to the grassroots and empowering people. So that is why I have immense respect for SEWA and through *Anubandh* I got a better insight into the different projects that SEWA runs because earlier, as I was connected to the Youth Connect, I was particularly knowing of few examples. But *Anubandh* gave a holistic view of the number of projects that SEWA has involved itself in and how they are actually creating a revolution, a gentle revolution. In fact, a lot of time I used to use this phrase with my friends, 'that the revolutions need not be bloody. It could be led by the silent steps of the few'.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): So before we open up, do you want to respond?

Elaben: The bazaar is my favorite. During the season of every crop the villages come together and pack the products in sacks and then come together and stay over night, maybe one or two nights, and the people around come, consumers come, but also other producers for good and healthy seeds. That is how they are linked directly to the consumers and producers and without any transportation or gas emissions. And they fix the price—farmers themselves fix the price and most of it is according to the market price. But these farmers usually have to resort to the brokers because they produce small quantities. So that's how the middlemen are cut out. And the women were the ones who welcomed it the most. From the bazaar they build up their own market network, which is now named as RUDI. Every season there's a large turnover. Under the RUDI they started processing it, so others groups of labor got employment, and then distributors, the people selling it, are the other group employed. So the women who can't go out, they became the processors—they turned the goods into spices and other things. And then their boys and girls became the distributors sold it from village to village. Now it has grown quite large. Now the benefit is that all the money from the producers and processors and distributors circulated through the districts and slowly after some years you can see that the purchase power has gone up—especially in the hands of women farmers—they are able to spend it for children's education or illness that needs to be treated and reclaiming their mortgage land. So it has shown that it is possible—because organizing is the main thing. Now their slogan is, 'I am the producer, I am the processor, I am the distributor and I am the consumer'

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): We have 15 minutes to open it up for the questions or comments, so while you formulate your questions let me take the liberty as moderator to ask you a question—and let me play a little bit of devil's advocate here, coming back to the idea of the practicality of *Anubandh*. I think listening to you was quite wonderful because you framed it not even as something that necessarily needs to be in the form of policy or in terms of government action but as something that is deeper philosophical message that people understand and can take it on in their individual lives and that has a ripple effect going outwards. Some may turn around and say 'Look, it sounds wonderful and it's all great but how is it going to work?' Especially now if you look it as rural India—because I can see this applying especially to the rural areas because if you look at our cities and look in this room I don't think there's a single thing which has come within 100 miles—so if you look at rural India and the mass exodus of people from out of rural India. You talk of self-sustaining communities when large droves are moving towards cities. Somewhere do you feel that it is important—beyond people reading the book and SEWA—that there is a palace for the government to get involved and to start a dialogue about policy decisions that make this idea practical. For example someone here was talking about land redistribution and someone was talking about the way public distribution works. These are all policy decisions that have led to the unsustainable situation that we're in. Where do governments come in, if at all, and how do you manage to convince them? Have you had any luck doing that?

Elaben: Let the government not come in. (laughter) Certain things cannot be solved by government. Why did we forget our trust, faith in Lok Shakti? What if Gandhiji did not depend on Lok Shakti? When it comes to basic needs and basic things, water, food, primary education, health and banking, it has to be left to the local people. We have the panchayat. Decentralization of power and decentralization of resources is the basic principle. Let the people decide—we take schemes of MGD all from the UN, there were 8, and we did not fulfill them, now they're elaborated into 18, as if you know the conferences will solve the problems. Our government then takes up those international programs and then they deliver it all the way through their local governments—can they do it? Let the resources go to the panchayat and honestly without corruption do that. Why do we not invest in the basic values of human life? And let the local people decide their programs—of course with the help of the government but design and plan and implement—actually monitoring should be in the hands of the local people. Let the local people also do evaluation with the outside evaluation, and then you have a complete picture of the fruitfulness of those schemes. So ultimately it boils down to faith in the local people. Our local people are so resourceful, so wonderful so far as basic values are concerned, thanks to our religion, though it is getting more and more organized. But all religions have given the right message of living a human life along with Mother Earth. So that is the broad, basic answer.

Queeny: I'd like to say something along the same lines as that. As far as the role of the government is concerned, the government does formulate a lot of schemes and a lot of policies that come every year—food security, health services acts—but we also need to remember that the government is made by the people, for the people, but it is also made of the people. So the office bearers are people like us who are unlike us so I think it is very important for the politicians, the civil servants, and the people preparing for the civil services, to actually adopt the essence of *Anubandh*: to be connected to themselves and to society and to the immediate world around them.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Very true.

Elaben: What I have emphasized the most in this book is cutting down the distance between the producer and the consumer as much as possible. Cutting down the distance between the resources—human and local natural resources and cutting the distance between governance and the governed. If this principle is followed, and in the case of the six basic needs—you know if someone wants to eat cheese and chocolates, let them go out—but basic food grains, vegetables, cereals, and milk should be local. And today clothing is out of hand now; it will take policy to lessen the exporting of cotton. And education needs to be localized. Primary school is so systemized and so standardized; the calendar does not suit the calendar of a farmer or local artisans or local seasons. Basic needs can be localized and I think *that* government policy does not need to go into supplying this, but invest all R&D into that. You know create your technology and tools and help at the local areas and invest in the local people.



Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): Any other comments?

Audience member: I just wanted to see taking forward what Queeny was saying, *Anubandh* is actually a way of life and it needs to be broken up into volumes that are understandable for children and needs to be understandable for children in the curriculum so that these students understand and grow up and will go into positions of leadership. Every decision they make—small or big—is instilled—that you are taking care of yourself, your community and your environment with that decision.

Audience member: It should come from early years and then make a change in society.

Audience member: I thought that there is such an extraordinary amount of concern today on crisis in the world—you find everyone talking about economic breakdowns. In that moment this vision of *Anubandh* can be a seed planted in the young. Having lived and walked on 50 years of experience and now towards the end of our lives, we leave an idea behind for the rest of the world. So it's not that we should construct how it should be implemented but it's my belief that ideas stay longer than actions. If you take Gandhiji but he's constantly in the back of our minds—capitalism mind, liberal minds, even Marx, these are ideas they've left behind. And I feel that Elaben has left behind ideas from her long walk and effort to bring so many things that I don't want to list, but removing the wretchedness of poverty and also to show that women are the most important agents in making that change. If one looks at it as something for the young—and I'm so thrilled to see so many younger people here and they're so smart nothing frightens them—and you people are so smart and the presentations I heard today were spine tingling for me to think that you are thinking like that gives hope. So I want to say, to my sister, what a great contribution you have made. It's an idea and that idea needs to be taken forward. And it can be because it is critical at this stage of our lives that we do something--take environment, it is there; take the breakdown of all the goods, which is happening and oversupply, you have the solution. And India is the fertile soil for this and India has the soil which we all came from and we can do And if we do it, maybe other countries will do it. You've traveled all over the world. Africa would actually carry this forward because they are suffering from the same issues. Latin America may not immediately, and we are not looking at East Asia or Europe, but it is an idea that can travel. And so I am so delighted Elaben, that you had the courage to write something so different from what is being written and that Renanaben this thought of inviting young people to interact with you.

Audience member: I think this is a wonderful book Elaben. I am so happy I got it and I read every page of it—it's a very persuasive book. But like Sreenivasan, I want to be a little bit of a devil's advocate and ask you one or two questions. One is as he mentioned there is a large-scale migration from rural to urban areas. The aspirations of the young in the rural areas, how do you satisfy this? Will doing handicrafts and going back to village industry satisfy them? You do mention that you

are not against technology. And you said in your earlier answers that R&D needs to be developed in rural areas. Can you shortly explain how SEWA has integrated modern technology into your local schemes? My second problem is, many years ago when I was teaching in Delhi University, I had a student who had studied under a basic education scheme. And I agree that it is an excellent thing, linking your education to handicrafts to what grows around you and so on, but this young man's complaint was, 'You're all praising it, but at the end of it what do I do? I could not get a single admission to an Indian college. They wouldn't admit me because they said I am not matriculate and have the necessary certificate'. He had to go to the United States to study. So he said, 'Can't we do something to modernize this kind of education?' There are very few and I'm afraid we scuttled the whole thing after independence and I don't think that was a good idea. How do you revive it? They feel there are two streams: you either send your children to elite schools, where they learn computers and technology and so on and expect the rural children to go into these schools and doesn't fit them in any employer?

Elaben: May I give this to Renanaben? She was equally involved with this book.

Renanaben (President of SEWA): I think the aspirations of young are very important. When we say 100 miles we are not talking about going backwards to when everyone is a potter and use old tools to survive. I think the point is how do we go forward. And the forward is how do you produce; say pottery or maybe financial services locally may be a better example. Does it mean you have to sit with a pot and count money? No, it doesn't mean that. We have Digital India and we have mobile phones. Mobile phones can be adapted to collect money, put it in a safe place, and have people pulling it out. Even this whole cashless thing: that you're able to move your money around. In the urban areas, we have cashless but in the rural areas it doesn't exist. Why shouldn't they be using their money locally, cashlessly? They can—the technology exists it just needs to be taken there. Similarly, designs: handlooms for example and cloth or printing. A lot of designs can be made on computers, and a lot of them are produced on computers, but local people have to learn that and then adapt to that. And there is electricity, and if there isn't then there's solar power, which is local. So unless you're investing in those things: local power, bringing computers to the villages, computer skills and IT to the villages, how do you take modern technology—I could start getting into the farming technologies. There are a lot of farming technologies, which are just not there in the villages. I was recently in Tamil Nadu and I was really impressed and for example when you do weaving you need six people to do the weaving: one person to do the weaving, others to do the spindling. They've changed it—either through grid technology or solar—they have a little electric spindle and she does her weaving and she's able to produce hand woven cloth that is reasonable priced and has beautiful designs. It's very doable. When a young person has these modern technologies at their fingertips in the villages they will not leave their homes and come to the slums in the urban areas. We're not talking about going backwards; we're talking about moving forward.

Elaben: And with this present technology can come in and people are ready. The young people do want to stay because their families are already there; their homes are there.

Renanaben (President of SEWA): There shouldn't be two streams: one the traditional and the other the 'modern'. Do you know how the people in the modern streams learn? They memorize everything by heart. They don't learn anything. The point is how do you change the education that's there and how do you make it more relevant? In a village where you have seasons that are not relevant to them at all. How do you change the education that it's not the same ratification?

Prerna: When we are talking about education, we have these core extracurriculars in our syllabus. So in these villages, the rural activities should be in that so that they are learning about their traditions, their farming, and about anything that is related to their handicrafts so it can be taken back home and it's not just learning about books and things that aren't relevant to their lives

Renanaben (President of SEWA): To go back to the policy issues and education, in university in Tamil Nadu called Gandhigram Rural University and their main purpose is teaching normal courses because their main purpose is getting BA and MA and MBA and all that. You have to get those curriculums passed by the education boards, but their purpose of being there is to do rural service and they spend a lot of their time doing rural service. But they spend a lot of their time doing two things that prevent that which if that changes allows students and teachers to work in the rural areas would be very normal. What are the two things? One is to get your university you have to get passed by NAAC and in the NAAC you have to do so many things: so many research papers, so many hours of teaching, etc. etc. There's a tiny little bit for other services. If those tiny marks were increased much more this university would be exactly to IIT's but it's just how you measure it. If my MA includes a certain amount of rural service that I've contributed to the rural area by doing this innovative work, if my thesis contributed in this way, and that is allowed in the curriculum then they would do it. But it's not allowed in the curriculum. It's not huge change, but it's a change in mindset.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): We're almost out of time—ok last one.

Audience member: Hello everyone, my name is Sanjana and I work at SEWA Delhi currently. My question is perception of progress and modernity today. We've standardized the definition of what we consider modernity and progress. A big role of TV and media spreading to rural ideas is a spreading of a perception. I recently watched a documentary called the Economics of Happiness, which said they saw a town where people said they used to be very happy, they used to be very content, but now that they are being shown issues of modernity and foreign countries they believe that they are backward, poor, and disadvantaged. So how do you get beyond these perceptions to get them to value their own work, their own place in society?

Elaben: I think this is a general question. The value of self-reliance is the greatest thing and in Gandhiji's message it was the same thing when it comes to education that udyog is the medium of education. So that it gives more and more dignity to your work—physical work and mental work and it keeps you to your roots and earn your own living. You learn all other subjects through udyog. And what has happened is a separation between udyog and education. There are these named universities and schools with the same courses and the same standards and then have added udyog. Now you just imagine the tremendous scope of education and modernization and technologies in sector of agriculture. As well as in India right through cotton and sale of cotton. So I think that udyog as a center of education can really a better dignity of labor and I think it will carry with it simplicity. Too much complexity is not simple, where everything is easy, easy to understand, and easy to convey.

Sreenivasan Jain (Moderator): So We are completely out of time, so thank you Elaben for being the seed of this discussion on a Sunday morning. I don't have many pearls of wisdom to wrap this up, other than I heard this book for the first time when Renanaben sent it to me so clearly this needs to be read more widely and shared. Thank you very much indeed.