



*"Freedom for me is being able to make decisions about where to go, where to work, how much to save and where to spend my money. Once I started to earn enough money through my work with Abodana Handicraft Cooperative, I am more free than I have ever been. I didn't know that a needle and thread could bring me this far."*

Heenaben,  
Board member and artisan  
Abodana Handicraft Cooperative

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Hello,

Welcome to Sahakarita - SEWA Cooperative Federation's bi-monthly digital publication. We work as a Women's Enterprise Support System, promoting and supporting grassroots women's enterprises. Through this newsletter we bring to you our work, stories of our grassroots women's collective enterprises, their needs and their contribution to the economy.

India celebrated its 75th Independence Day on 15th August 2022. The second volume of the newsletter explores the intersection of the women's movement, the cooperative movement and the independence movement in India and what freedom really means to informal women worker's cooperatives and collective enterprises.

We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed putting this together!

If you would like to support or partner with us, do get in touch. If you found this volume valuable, please share it on social media.



“Cooperatives, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay points out, had two components which satisfied a basic hunger within her: independence and self-reliance.”

Vinay Lal,  
Professor of History & Asian American Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

We had a conversation with Dr. Vinay Lal, on Kamaladevi's life and the confluence of the independence movement, the women's movement, and the beginnings of the cooperative movement in India. Dr. Vinay Lal is a Professor of History and Asian American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and has edited the book *A Passionate Life: Writings by and on Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay*, with Ellen Carol Dubois.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) was part of the freedom movement and contributed to social and economic reform in India post-independence. She was pivotal in the women's movement and pioneered the cooperative movement in India and set up the Indian Cooperative Union in 1948, establishing the first cooperative in Chattarpur near Delhi. She also worked to revive traditional handicrafts and uplift artisan communities. Her vision contributed to the foundation of several institutions including The National School of Drama and Crafts Council of India, among others.

**Q: Kamaladevi started one of the first few cooperatives of a newly independent India called Indian Cooperative Union that worked for the rehabilitation and resettlement of over 50,000 people coming from the other side of the border during Partition, which eventually became Faridabad. Where did her interest in cooperation come from?**

**Dr. Lal:** Kamaladevi describes in her Memoirs, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*, that an old family friend introduced her to the idea of cooperatives. This is at a time when she was seeking to push her restless youthful energy into “fruitful channels”. He introduced her to Indian cooperatives and she attended some conferences. Cooperatives, she points out, had two components which satisfied a basic hunger within her: independence and self-reliance. Her travels through Europe, particularly the Scandinavian countries, and China (on which she wrote extensively) widened her interest in cooperatives, and she never doubted that the

cooperative movement was conducive to happier, healthier, and even economically more productive lifestyles. But one has to think dialectically: Gandhi, in 1920, had launched the non-cooperation movement. The idea was to cease to cooperate with the oppressor. Kamaladevi marvelled at its success; but she marvelled even more at the idea of how much more could be achieved if there was cooperation between equals. Her interest in cooperatives, in that sense, should not be reduced to “the cooperative movement” as such, though that is of course a critical part of the story, and says much about her determination to make it possible for people to achieve economic dignity and self-sufficiency; the idea of “cooperation” extended beyond, to cooperation between women and men, between nations, and so on. As she wrote in *The Goals of Social Reconstruction*, *Modern Review* (August 1945), “The same institution and technique needs to be expanded from the small group-functioning to the nation and from each national area to the entire world.”

**Q: 75 years to Indian independence, and we've seen both the women's movement and the cooperative movement in India take their own path. What according to you was Kamaladevi's biggest contribution to both of these movements?**

**Dr. Lal:** Kamaladevi is unquestionably what would be called a "pioneer" in creating a path for the women's movement in India, though I might say that she also forged links with feminists and socialists around the world and thus has a place in what could be called a global history of the women's movement. Her contributions are too numerous to be done justice in this very short note, but one can begin with the idea that she was forthright in establishing that women had as much a right to the public sphere as men. This is seldom recognized. Just how far ahead she was of her times is indicated by the fact that this right is still disputed by many men in India. It is also remarkable that, though she was no economist, she as far back as 1939 argued that women's work at home was unrecognised labour and that the "housewife" deserved recognition—not just token recognition, but that her work contributed to national wealth. She stood for elected office long before independence; she took active part in the freedom struggle; she was a founder of the Congress Socialist Party; she stood up to Gandhi when she thought it necessary to do so, while recognizing him as peerless and, in her words, as a "magician"; and throughout, in every respect, she argued for the dignity and equality of women. With regards to cooperatives, though she put up a valiant fight and even played a critical role in making the newly independent nation of India more attentive to cooperatives, her own success was obviously more measured in some ways. She founded the Indian Cooperative Union (ICU) in 1948, and the refugees at Chattarpur formed themselves into a cooperative at her instigation. The whole story cannot be followed here, but the interest that Nehru and the Indian government took in cooperatives can really be attributed to

Kamaladevi's grit and interventions. Her joint contribution to both is best exemplified in the story of SEWA itself.

**Q: What were her ideas of social reform and upliftment of women, particularly using cooperatives as a model? Are there any writings on these?**

**Dr. Lal:** Kamaladevi wrote widely on women in India and their own struggle for freedom. Her first book on this subject, *The Awakening of Indian Women*, was published in 1939. Her last two published books revert to the subject: *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom* (1982) and her memoirs. But she also wrote many essays on women, their work, their aspirations, their struggle for equality and freedom—these are scattered here and there, though some were collected together in a book called *At the Cross-roads* (1947, edited by Yusuf Mehreally). One discerns in many of these writings her sense that women were more amenable to the idea of cooperatives than men, seeing in the welfare of one the welfare of all, and vice versa.

**Q: Could you tell us about some of the grassroots women's movements that Kamaladevi led in India especially during the Independence movement?**

**Dr. Lal:** The best source for this is her Memoirs, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*. She describes the part that she played in the Salt Satyagraha (152-56). What is intriguing about many of her accounts, as I noted in my essay in the book that Du Bois and I edited, *A Passionate Life* (Zubaan, 2017, with a foreword by Gloria Steinem), is that she zeroes in on insults to the "national flag" (155-56). Elsewhere she describes her involvement in the All India training camp for women volunteers set up at Borivali, on the outskirts of Bombay, which was shut down after the government unleashed repression. She was arrested and taken to the Arthur Road prison. She was then shifted to the

Hindalga Women's jail at Belgaum, where though Kamaladevi herself became ill, she started collecting, as she says, a few "prerequisites for setting up a hospital" (174). Wherever possible, she entered into conversations with women activists, seeing herself as someone who could conscientise

women both to the role they could play in bringing India closer to independence and how their own activism was a way of achieving personal growth. There are many more stories of this kind to be told about her.



## The Srujan Story: An attempt to build cooperatives of the future

*"How can I be free, if I am not even allowed to make a decision on my own?"* asks Disha, 21, whose mother is an Anganwadi teacher and father is a government school teacher, from Meghaninagar in Ahmedabad. She has completed her Bachelors in Science. Though her parents have worked very hard to ensure that she has access to education, in the community that she comes from, she is not allowed to step outside her house on her own. Disha dreams of having a stable job, and of earning her own money. She knows that when she earns money, she will also regain choice.

This is not just the case with Disha. Ashvini, 18, who has completed her 12th grade from the same neighbourhood, echoes this feeling. *"My parents have educated me, but they will not let me work. Is this freedom?"* Both her parents are tailors, and they educated her to give her a better life. Yet in her community, the women don't go outside the community to work.

With an average age of 29, India has one of the youngest populations globally. The Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India recently launched the E-shram portal, the first ever national database of unorganised workers, including migrant workers, construction workers, gig and platform workers. Nearly half of the 40 million workers registered on this portal are women and of the women, 65.68 per cent belong to the 16-40 age group. This is a significant number of young women in the informal workforce.

The UK Cooperative Movement has partnered with SEWA Cooperative Federation to give young women like Disha and Ashvini opportunities to



*Disha, second from right, attending a Srujan community meeting*

build skills and careers that they conventionally don't have access to, and become part of building women's cooperatives and collectives of the future. The two-year Srujan programme hopes to incubate a women-owned, women-led grassroots media and research collective. More young women deserve opportunities with work and income security, fair wages, access to social security, and equal participation in decisions that affect their lives.

A report by UN Women in partnership with media watchdog Newslaundry revealed that men controlled over 80 per cent of TV panel slots and 75 per cent of the by-lines in the Indian mainstream media. Women in general, but especially conversations around informality and women's work are practically missing from the media and policy and development landscape. Through the Srujan programme, these young women will be trained in research, data collection, reporting, writing, social media management, photography, and graphic design. These sector-specific skills will not only offer them an opportunity for sustained livelihood but also empower them with the tools,

skills and the medium to create evidence through research of informal women workers and their cooperatives and collective enterprises and tell stories of their communities, in their own voices.

Disha, who has attended three media-related training sessions so far says, *"After coming here, it feels like I can do so much with my life!"* Yet, the task ahead is challenging, considering that numerous factors can, and do stop young women from the informal sector from aspiring for something larger. But they are negotiating their realities and pushing boundaries to form a grassroots and media collective of their own.

Srujan is a medium for these young women to create and claim space in areas that are otherwise out of their reach. Though this is only the beginning, the cooperatives of the future – nurtured, owned, and managed by young women are here, and they are coming to change the way the world sees them.



*Left & Right : Young women attending media and research trainings as part of the Srujan programme*



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*years of solidarity*



## Solidarity & Sustainability : Abodana Handicraft Cooperative's Journey

Heenaben, an artisan, used to work for a leading designer in Ahmedabad, doing mirror work and making handmade tassels for expensive wedding ensembles. She got paid on a daily basis and during the wedding season from October to February, she had work every day. Work was infrequent during the other months, and she had no work or income security. This was the reality of 50 other women artisans that worked with her. On a given day, they didn't know if they had money to feed their families.

Heenaben heard about the Abodana Handicraft Cooperative two years ago when the cooperative was organising and speaking with women artisans in her area. *"What drew me in was that I would get to learn so many handicrafts and wouldn't have to practise only mirror-work"* she says. The Abodana Handicraft Cooperative in Ahmedabad is a women-owned and women-run collective enterprise, with a membership of 350 women artisans. Capacity building is central to the cooperative's work. They offer basic and advanced training in domain skills like embroidery, badla, tie-dye, and several other handicraft techniques. *"Women artisans have learnt their handicraft informally from their mothers and grandmothers. They haven't had access to formal training. With changing times and markets, the raw materials have also changed. There is a need to teach them newer skills and techniques, colour palettes and designs, and upskill them in their primary handicraft techniques, so that they can adapt to the*

*new market,"* says Amishaben, manager and master craftsperson of embroidery of Abodana Handicraft Cooperative. Over the last three years, Abodana has created a cadre of grassroots master trainers who can train and upskill other women artisans in various domains.

Heenaben was sceptical at first. *"I didn't believe it when they said that there would be work every day. Even big designers wouldn't give work to women like me every day."* Two years on, Heenaben not only earns more than twice of what she earned previously, but she is also on the democratically elected board of the Abodana Handicraft Cooperative and is part of all its decision-making.

The Indian textile and handicraft industry is the largest employment generator after agriculture. According to the Ministry of textiles, Government of India, women artisans constitute over 56.13 per cent of all artisans. It wasn't surprising then, that it was one of the worst hit sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many women artisans who were daily wagers lost their livelihood. According to a report published in June 2020 by the All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association, artisans had no cash reserves to use as working capital to purchase raw materials during the first two months of the lockdown.

The Abodana Handicraft Cooperative too lost orders during the pandemic, but they were quick to respond.

With the support of the SEWA Cooperative Federation, they were able to access working capital and pivot to mask production. Masks were an essential commodity and ensured continued livelihood for women artisans, which was the central focus of the cooperative. The cooperative produced over 300,000 masks offering sustained income to 150 women artisans when all other orders had stopped. Not only did the artisans of the collective receive continued livelihood support, but the sisterhood and solidarity helped them get through a difficult time.

Over the past year, with the market reviving post the pandemic, Abodana Handicraft Cooperative has focused on a mainly business-to-business model, to ensure continued livelihood, while creating and developing a new range of innovative products for the consumer market.

Their range of consumer products are not only innovative in design but also sustainable and upcycled from scrap cloth, giving waste a new lease of life. While conversations around sustainable

fashion have picked up, they are restricted to elite, privileged circles. It is estimated that a massive 92 million tonnes of waste is created by the fashion industry every year. Here is a small women's handicraft cooperative embracing true sustainability – adding hand embroidery and patchwork to old scrap cloth and creating beautiful products, while putting more money in the hands of their women artisans.

Recently the women artisans of Abodana Handicraft Cooperative modelled their newly developed product line for a photoshoot. Heenaben is one of the models in this photoshoot. *"I never thought women like me could ever model until I came here"* she says. The Abodana Handicraft Cooperative will launch its new upcycled collection next month on a digital e-commerce platform developed by SEWA Cooperative Federation to market and promote women-owned, women-run cooperatives and collective enterprises, products, and services.



*Left & Right : Women artisan members of Abodana Handicraft Cooperative modelling their products*



SEWA Lok Swasthya Health Cooperative's new haircare range, made with natural ingredients and a whole lot of love, available online now!

Now on  
**amazon.in**

SEWA Lok Swasthya Health Cooperative, a women-owned women-run enterprise that manufactures Ayurvedic products including a range of haircare, skin care and immunity builders have started selling their products online on Amazon. Made with natural ingredients and a whole lot of love - you can now place your orders for their herbal oil, aloe vera shampoo, face pack and other products [here](#).

By shopping for these products, you not only get good quality Ayurvedic health products that nourish you, but you also support an enterprise with women workers at every stage of production.

## From the Archives



The shutting down of Ahmedabad's textile mills in the 1980s left thousands of workers without employment, forcing women to turn to the city's garbage dumps for livelihood. They would start their day at the break of dawn and endure unclean and hazardous working conditions, and long working hours to earn a meagre five rupees. SEWA organised these women rag-pickers and collectivised them into a cleaning collective. In May 1980, SEWA assigned thirty-one women to provide cleaning services to the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. This experience came with the realisation that women could form cooperatives based on everyday household chores. The women struggled for five years to register the Saundarya Safai Mandali as a cooperative in 1986. It was the first ever women's service cooperative. Today, the cooperative provides services at prominent institutions, including the Indian Institute Of Management Ahmedabad, Physical Research Laboratory, Sardar Patel Institute of Public Administration, etc.

## Bulletin Board

- SEWA Cooperative Federation marked its 30th anniversary with a celebratory event at Ahmedabad Management Association on 8th July 2022. The occasion was graced by SEWA Cooperative Federation founder, Elaben Bhatt and dignitaries including Ghanshyambhai Amin, Chairman, Gujarat State Cooperative Union & Cooperative Bank of India and Bhavnaben Jadeja, President of the Women Committee, Gujarat State Cooperative Union. Representatives from twenty seven women's cooperatives were present. The milestone received mention in leading local newspapers.

[Indian Express](#)

[Ahmedabad Mirror](#)

- Salonie Muralidhara Hiriyur, Senior Coordinator, SEWA Cooperative Federation, co-authored an article titled *Domestic work and platformisation in India and South Africa* in *Global Perspectives on Women, Work and Digital Labour Platform*, a collection of articles from around the world on women's experiences of digital labour platforms.

[Read here](#)

- Mirai Chatterjee, Chairperson, SEWA Cooperative Federation, spoke at a panel on Social and Solidarity Economy at an event organised by International Cooperative Alliance Asia and Pacific (ICA-AP) and International Labour Organisation. The event, held on 9th August 2022, marked twenty years since the adoption of ILO's Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193).
- Mirai Chatterjee, Chairperson, SEWA Cooperative Federation, was part of a meeting on 1st August 2022 for Women and Social Entrepreneurship organised by VAMNICOM and International Cooperative Alliance Asia and Pacific.
- Jigna Surkar, Senior Coordinator - Enterprise Development, SEWA Cooperative Federation, attended a workshop on 29th July 2022 on the reconstruction of existing schemes of the Gujarat Women Economic Development Corporation & Department of Women and Child Development organised by the Gujarat Women Economic Development Corporation.



“

*Political freedom is incomplete without economic freedom.  
It is when the people have both, that we will get lasting  
peaceful stability.*

”

Elaben Bhatt,  
Founder  
SEWA Movement



# IN SOLIDARITY



A SEWA COOPERATIVE FEDERATION PODCAST

## FT. ANITA GURUMURTHY

Founding Member & Executive Director

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Episode 1.

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