

Profile of Bhanuben Kantilal Koshti

Bhanuben Kantilal Koshti belongs to the second generation of home-based bidi rollers of Ahmedabad. She was only six months old when she came to Ahmedabad. Her mother would go out to work where sculptures of marble were made. She would come back home and roll bidi in the night. This way she would try to make her two ends meet. She along with her elder sister and mother lived with her maternal grand mother for some time and then her mother moved to separate a house with her two children. Her mother got separated from her father when she was very small.

As a child Bhanuben had a tough life. When her mother would go out to work she would do some cleaning work for her neighbour. She would give her some food and old cloths of her daughter. This way Bhanuben grew up to roll bidis at the age of 14. Later her mother moved to her own house with her two daughters.

Bhanuben studied up to 7th and got married at the age of 18 years to the younger brother of her brother –in -law who already had T.B. Her mother and Bhanuben knew it even before the marriage still they went in to the marriage, says Bhanuben-“We had no option, I did not have my father, we had to think of the society, my mother could not keep me un married” her husband wont work, but there was no body to set him right. She would sit home and roll bidis but her mother – in – law would not be satisfied with it. She would ask her to go out and work in a factory, she tried it also but it didn't work as she was pregnant and her health was not good.

Turned towards rolling bidis- Bhanuben turned to rolling bidis after she could not continue working at the factory. She would get Rs. 4 for rolling 1000 bidis, but the kind of leaves contractor used to give her, she could not roll more than 700 bidis.

Came in Contact with SEWA –

Once her mother in law took her to a meeting called by SEWA- many senior leaders including Elaben Bhatt, Renanaben Jhabwala, addressed this meeting, they inquired about the wages women were getting and informed them what under the law they should get. They also explained how they could draw strength by getting united. Joining a union to get a better wage was some thing Bhanuben had never thought of in her farthest imagination. There was another difficulty- the membership fee of five rupees. It was quite difficult for the bidi roller women. But she understood that unless they get united, the company wouldn't budge to their demand of raising wage. She along with her elder sister joined SEWA and convinced many others. She even spent her hard earned money in meeting bidi rollers, and expanding the union's reach among them. She also attended Workers' Education Classes and, inspired many others to attend these classes. SEWA Taught her to fight for her rights collectively.

It was very difficult to remain united for poor bidi roller women; they were extremely vulnerable to the temptations offered by the company people, but the leaders would resist the offer of taking an increased wage for themselves in a bargain to keep quiet on wages

given to others. Irritated with their union, the bidi company owners would also try to harass them. Remembering one such incident Bhanu ben told-“once some 30 bidi rollers went to the employer with the rolled bidis and demanded increased wage, we had a big fight with the employer who refused to take the bidi at all, he alleged that the women had stolen his money. The women called the senior organizers from SEWA who came with the labour inspector. On checking he found that the money was not with the women but with the employer himself. He appologised and gave increased wage to the women”.

Evolved as a leader- It was not that Bahnuben took part in the confrontations with the employers only. She participated in many negotiations with them also .In the process of evolving as a leader she also tried to understand the issues faced by the contractors hired by employers. They were like puppets in the hands of the company owner-they would not give the contractors sufficient amount of leaves to roll bidis, they wont give wages in time, to make payments to the women-as a SEWA Aagewan (leader/organizers) Bhanuben would also be considerate to the contractors.

As a SEWA organizer she took part in many landmark cases-she was a complainant in a case against the sale- Purchase system. Remembering it Bhanuben said- (“the Seth (owner of the company withdrew the diaries (the logbooks), and said in the court that the bidi roller women were not his employees, he purchased the bidis from them-but the women by this time had taken training from SEWA and they retained the diaries (logbooks) which mattered. Also we trapped the him taking bidis from select4ed bidi rollers and not purchasing from others. This was enough to prove him the employer of the bidi roller women and SEWA won the case in the court for its members.”

Bhanuben feels sorry that despite of all the hard work and struggle, the bidi employers had the upper hand at the end. Ultimately it was employers’ decision to give work to the women or not. From 4 Rupees/1000 bidis, the earnings of bidi rollers have gone up to Rs. 39/1000 bidis, but so have gone up the prices of all necessary things.

Elected into SEWA’s Executive Committee – Bhanuben got busier with organisational work at SEWA. She was first made the representative and then got elected to the Executive committee, which is the chief executive authority in the organisation. The different trainings she took at SEWA and at Bidi Welfare Board. It was not an easy journey for Bhanu ben- as a child she grew up in a broken home, as a wife she got a companion who was destined meet an early death, as a daughter-in- law she had a mother –in –law who could be called a real tyrant ... she was always an oppressed person until she joined SEWA! She developed as a person and her life also improved. Only after joining SEWA she learnt that she should have a saving account also, learnt to save. She saved and paid the debts against her house her “kachha” house. She purchased another house also. She also purchased an autoricksha for her son. As a SEWA leader she has traveled extensively throughout the country. She also represented bidi rollers in labour ministry and many other forums and took part in many rallies. Lately she met with an accident and doesn’t go out of home unless it is very necessary. Looking back she feels that though her life had a miserable beginning, SEWA gave it a meaning.