



Neither A Complete Success Nor A Total Failure

Report of A SEWA Campaign To Organise Bidi Workers

Most reports sent to us tend to mention only the positive outcome of various struggles. We found this report, by one of the full time workers of SEWA, Ahmedabad, particularly useful because it gives an idea of the actual zig zag process which most organising efforts go through and the persistence required to make very very small gains.

I first met Anasuya when she joined SEWA as an organiser. She was 20 years old. She belongs to a community of *bidi* workers and was the first girl in her family to go to college. I didn't see much of her at first because her job was to mobilise savings for the SEWA bank and I was the SEWA research expert. We collaborated in a campaign to organise *bidi* workers. It was an average SEWA campaign, not completely successful, nor a total failure. Many other SEWA campaigns were going on at the same time but I have deliberately left them out to concentrate on telling the story of "How the *bidi* workers got their identity cards."

The story begins when Anasuya brings a 40 year old, *pan* chewing woman to Ela Bhatt (Elaben), SEWA's general secretary. She introduces the woman as Zohra Bibi, a *bidi* worker from Patan. Patan is a small town, 200 km away from Ahmedabad and famous for its weaving and *bidi* making.

"There are thousands of us *bidi* workers there", Zohra Bibi tells us. "We have no other work and are very poor."

"Can't we organise them?", Anasuya asks eagerly, "My brothers have given me permission to go to Patan."

"She can stay in my house", adds Zohra Bibi.

"Maybe we can start with a survey of the *bidi* workers' socio-economic conditions", Elaben agrees.

So Anasuya and I design a survey form with simple questions about the *bidi* worker's family background, her

earnings and working conditions. Armed with 200 copies of the survey questionnaire, Anasuya takes the early morning bus to Patan where she is welcomed by Zohra Bibi and her numerous relatives. "The women were happy to see me", Anasuya reports later. "They offered me water and then sat down to roll *bidis* as they answered the questions. Sometimes they offered me tea or *sherbet*. One woman even invited me to her son's wedding. But one sleazy Mehmood Bhai kept following me around. If I asked a woman a question he wouldn't let her speak but would insist on answering for her."

Later we found out that Mehmood Bhai is a member of Majoor Mahajan and a spy for the contractors. The Majoor Mahajan, or Textile Labour Organisation is a trade union with branches all over Gujarat.

The results of the survey show that most of the *bidi* workers in Patan are Muslim women. All are homeworkers. Most work for a contractor, a few directly for *bidi* traders. The women are supplied tobacco and tendu leaves in their houses and paid four to five rupees for a thousand *bidis*—about half of the legal minimum wage. Of the women 21 percent are sole supporters of their families. The rest contribute substantially to the family income. Children help to dry the *bidi* leaves and roll the *bidis*. The houses are full of

tobacco dust and most of the women have respiratory diseases. Most houses are *pucca* but in dilapidated condition. Although most women do not wear burkhas they are not allowed to leave their *mohallas*. Most women are illiterate.

The survey over, Anasuya calls a meeting of the *bidi* workers. I take the morning bus to Patan and am surprised to find over 200 of these usually sequestered women gathered under a banyan tree.

"At first my husband forbade me to attend meetings. But after he met Anasuya, he saw she is a good and simple girl and knew there would be no harm in the meeting", Karima Bibi explains to me.

"I had to go to each woman's house to convince her," Anasuya says. "Habib Bhai, who owns a garage and is much respected by the Muslims, was very helpful to me. He told the women that *bidi* workers should go to the meeting and form a union. With his support, I could persuade many women to come."

Anasuya begins the meeting by explaining SEWA's work with women in the unorganised sector. Then I talk about the benefits of forming a union. The women talk about their problems.

"I work 10 hours a day and earn only five rupees", Hava Bibi says. "My husband has TB and we have four children."

"The contractor gives us less tobacco and we have to make up the deficit from our own earnings", complains Karima Bibi.

"The government has opened a clinic for *bidi* workers but the doctor refuses to treat us," says little Khatun. "I had high fever and my mother took me to the clinic which is right in front of our house. But the doctor said we were not *bidi* workers because we didn't have identity cards. My mother showed my hands, all stained with tobacco, but he still wouldn't believe us. So we had to go to a private doctor, who charged Rs 25."

"The same happened to me", one woman says. Others nod their heads.

"Shall we take up this problem right away?" I ask, "All in favour raise your hands." All hands go up.

"Let us form a committee and go to the clinic", I suggest. The women nominate Zohra Bibi, Hava Bibi and Karima Bibi, Anasuya and me, and we proceed to the clinic.

A board outside a small stone building informs us that this is the *Bidi* Workers' Welfare Centre (under *Bidi* and Cigar Workers Welfare Act). One room is the *bidi* workers' clinic, the rest are offices. We go in and a short, thin, partly bald man looks up nervously. The nameplate on his desk says 'N. Swaminathan, welfare officer.' Mr Swaminathan offers chairs to Anasuya and me and gestures for the Muslim women to squat on the floor. Instead, we share the two chairs among the five of us, each balancing on half a buttock.

The welfare officer tells us that the centre is funded from the *bidi* workers' welfare fund, which is collected from a tax on *bidi*. The clinic is supposed to treat *bidi* workers free. It is also supposed to give scholarships to *bidi* workers' children and subsidies for them to build houses. But all this is only for *bidi* workers who have identity cards.

"Nobody in Patan has identity cards", exclaims Zohra Bibi, "Our *maliks* (owners) will never give us such cards!"

"Rules are rules", says

Swaminathan, ending the conversation. As we go out we see the doctor asleep on a *charpai* in his empty clinic.

Out in the street, I suggest we go and talk to the *malik*. "You go.

He'll get angry if he sees us", says Karima Bibi.

"We are your representatives. Without you we have no standing," Anasuya insists.

There is a moment of indecision, then Hava Bibi says: "I'll go. I'm not afraid of that blood sucker." So we all decide to go to the biggest *malik*, Amritlal Thakker.

Thakker has two shops in the main bazar. One shop sells plastic goods and the other is stocked with boxes of *bidis* and chewing tobacco. There is a big green and yellow sign on the awning "Smoke Amrit *Bidi*. They are No. 1", with a painting of a smiling Amritlal. We see Amrit Bhai sitting at his strongbox. He is about fifty, wearing a white kurta and dhoti, and has an unshaven stubble of beard.

"What do you want?" he asks me suspiciously. Then he sees Hava Bibi climbing into his shop. "Down, down, you", he shouts. Hava Bibi scuttles down.



A worker making *bidis*

In response to my explanations about the *bidi* clinic he says : “i am only a trader, not an employer. I know nothing about identity cards.” He refuses to talk any more.

We return to the banyan tree where the *bidi* women are patiently waiting for us. A few men *bidi* workers have joined them. “The owners don’t want to give us identity cards because that will establish an employer-employee relationship and then they will have to pay minimum wages”, the men tell us.

I describe what happened and ask what we should do next. “We should go on strike”, shouts one of the men. The women are silent. One or two shake their heads.

“Can’t the government do anything?” asks a woman timidly. Finally the women decide to present a memorandum to the labour commissioner.

Anasuya and I return to Ahmedabad. We are followed by a frantic letter from Hava Bibi. “My contractor has stopped giving me work. He says if you want work go to SEWA—.” Anasuya takes the next bus to Patan. “Hava Bibi is not getting work”, Anasuya reports on her return the next day. “Her daughter is ill and her husband has TB. She has no food in her house. She doesn’t even have anything to pawn. I went to see the contractor, Bhure Khan, to persuade him to take Hava Bibi back. But he only shouted at me, ‘Go back to Ahmedabad. You are spoiling our (Muslim) women with your loose ways!’”

The other women too are unwilling to help. The atmosphere seems to have changed. “I tried to call a meeting of the *bidi* women but no one came. When I went to their houses they turned their faces away from me”, Anasuya says.

Karima Bibi, who has accompanied Anasuya, explains: “Everybody is afraid. The contractors are making an example of Hava Bibi.”

What next? Of course, SEWA’s lawyer files a case for reinstatement in the labour court. But it will be years

before the case is even heard, let alone decided. Meanwhile, what will Hava Bibi and her family eat?

Hava Bibi is no stranger to adversity. Nor does she give up so easily. “If I could get a loan, I could do a little business in threading beads”, she writes from Patan. A nationalised bank is out of the question since Hava Bibi can offer no security, and anyway it would be too long before her loan gets sanctioned. Finally, Manila SEWA Cooperative Bank agrees to give Hava Bibi a loan of Rs 300.

Meanwhile, Elaben presents a



No retirement age

memorandum signed by 100 women to the labour commissioner. “...We request you to instruct the *bidi* traders to issue us identity cards immediately...”

“These are all home workers, they are not proper employees,” the labour commissioner says doubtfully.

“But the *Bidi* and Cigar Act specifically defines homeworkers as employees”, Elaben replies.

“They are all housewives doing some leisure work. If we press the owners, they will stop giving them work and these poor families will have less income”, says the labour commissioner and refuses to take any action.

Elaben takes a delegation of women from Patan to Sanat Mehta, the state

labour minister. He is sympathetic to the cause of *bidi* workers.

“I started my career organising *bidi* workers into a union in my native Saurashtra”, he recalls wistfully. “Those days women were always behind parda and very exploited.” Suddenly he starts singing. “I roll *bidis* all day, behind my veil, for only eight paise, Oh sister.”

He phones the labour commissioner and says : “Send an inspector to Patan immediately. Arrange a meeting with the owners and come to some agreement.”

Two days later the labour commissioner phones Elaben. He has fixed the meeting, but he insists that since Majoor Mahajan already has a union we should collaborate with their representative.

The women are not happy with this development “Oh no, that man is always drunk”, says Karima Bibi.

“He is in the pocket of the owners”, adds Zohra Bibi. Nevertheless, we agree to ‘collaborate’ with him.

We go to the meeting at the Patan *Bidi* Welfare Centre. Mattresses are arranged in the room with bolsters against the walls. The deputy chief labour inspector, Mr I.K. Patel, is already leaning against a bolster. But he shifts uncomfortably from time to time as his trousers are too tight. Swaminathan runs to and fro nervously. Elaben, Hava Bibi, Zohra Bibi, Karima Bibi, Anasuya and I arrange ourselves along one wall. Half an hour later, five *maliks* come in together, wearing starched white kurtas and dhotis. They sit as far from us as possible. Last, the Majoor Mahajan representative, Govardhan Bhai, staggers in and goes and sits with the *maliks*.

“Shall we begin ?” I.K. Patel asks.

“First these women must go out”, says Amritlal Thakker, glaring at the three Bibis. “They are our employees, we won’t bargain with them.”

“If they leave then we leave too”, says Elaben.

Amritlal stands up. We stand up.

Swaminathan scuttles over and whispers something to Amritlai. He glares but sits down again.

We begin with a string of complaints : The *maliks* pay below minimum wages. They don't give identity cards. They dismiss workers who have been with them for 30 years. They don't deal with workers directly but employ contractors.

The *maliks* retaliate : The women steal tobacco. Their *bidis* are substandard. They are always late with their work.

I.K. Patel steers the discussion to the question of identity cards. "I have only 10 employees", says Amritlai.

"You are a liar, you have over 100", shouts Hava Bibi indignantly.

Amritlai stands up, outraged, and has to be pacified by Patel and Swaminathan.

"We are not opposed to the cards but these workers are not constant", says Bhala Bhai, another owner. "One day a mother comes, next day the daughter, then the daughter-in-law. In whose name can we make a card ?"

"On the contrary, you keep changing the names of workers on the rolls so that no one can claim she is permanent", retorts Elaben.

However, the *maliks* agree to identity cards 'in principle.' So it is agreed that SEWA will give a list of workers to the labour office, who will verify it with the *maliks*. Everyone has a cup of tea and the meeting breaks up. We begin an intensive list making campaign, but the women are being intimidated. "The contractor sends messages to my house every night. If I give my name to SEWA he'll stop giving me work", says a woman.

"Bhure Khan shouts abuse after me when I go out to make the list", says Zohra Bibi. "He has also spread rumours that I am a loose woman."

We manage to make a list of only 400 women, although there are over 2,000 *bidi* workers in Patan. We submit it to the labour office but hear nothing from them for three weeks. Then the labour commissioner tells us that the *maliks* deny that any woman on the

list is their employee.

The workers' enthusiasm is considerably dampened now. Even the men who had wanted to go on strike say "Don't disturb a sleeping giant."

"The women are no longer ready to make a union. Each woman says she will join only after others have joined", says Hava Bibi bitterly. "They are all afraid of the *maliks*."

Anasuya stops going to Patan. Elaben writes to the *bidi* welfare commissioner who is based in Rajasthan, asking him to waive the identity card rule. There is no reply.

Two years pass. SEWA has written 11 letters to the welfare commissioner without a single reply. Hava Bibi has found work with another contractor. Anasuya has learnt shorthand and typing and has taken over SEWA's secretarial work.

identifying the workers", Elaben offers.

"I can't take that responsibility alone. The state labour department must cooperate with me", says Mr Sharma.

The labour commissioner agrees to cooperate in issuing cards. It is decided that the cards will be co-signed by a welfare officer and a labour officer. But the chief labour inspector stalls. "It will be my responsibility", he grumbles, "If a wrong name gets in, someone might make a fuss which will affect my promotions." He manages to delay implementation for another six months, but finally we get a letter asking us to accompany two officers to Patan.

We write to Hava Bibi and Zohra Bibi and they come to Ahmedabad. "We need a full time SEWA organiser in Patan now", Elaben tells them. "Find an educated girl in one of your



Making bidis at home

One day a question is raised in parliament as to why the *bidi* welfare fund has not been spent. The central labour minister writes an angry letter to the welfare commissioner. The welfare commissioner, Mr Sharma, finally replies to our 11 letters. He is coming to Ahmedabad, can we meet him? He is ready to waive the rule that the owner should issue identity cards. Can we suggest an alternative?

"Why can't the welfare office issue identity cards? We will help in

families."

Zohra Bibi brings her niece, a fiery 19 year old, educated up to tenth class and the daughter of a policeman. She has the same name as her aunt so we call her "little" Zohra. Chaperoned by Hava Bibi, little Zohra escorts the two inspectors around Patan and within a week 700 identity cards are ready.

Then we get a postcard from little Zohra. "Respectful greetings. By the grace of God all are well. Identity cards are being distributed. Contractors are

threatening to beat me. They are tearing up the cards.”

I go to Patan the next day to find hubbub outside the welfare centre. Contractor Bhure Khan stands outside the gate. I see him snatch a woman's identity card, tear it into pieces and throw the pieces in the air. A small group of women led by little Zohra stands at a distance shouting at him. I push past the contractor and go into the centre to find Swaminathan cowering behind his desk.

I go out to find Bhure Khan and the women yelling abuse at one another. I calm down the women. Then little Zohra and I walk up to Bhure Khan. Seeing Zohra drives him into a fury. He froths at the mouth. I talk to him till he is calmer. Then I tell him that this group of women is going into the centre and if he tries to harm us physically, he will be in trouble with the police. So the first group of *bidi* workers gets treated at the clinic.

Two weeks later, little Zohra comes to the SEWA office. “Some women are using the clinic now, but some are afraid and have given their cards back to the welfare centre”, she reports. But now there is a new problem. Bhalu Bhai Thakker is going to close down his shop and give all his work to contractors, and 52 women will lose their jobs.

“We have decided to do a *dharna* outside his shop. You must come”, little Zohra says. But that is another story.

Follow Up

Vimochana women's forum, Bangalore, have written to say that they met the chief minister, Karnataka, on March 23, to discuss the beating up of women demonstrators on March 8, reported in *Manushi* No. 21. He apologised to them and assured them that an enquiry would be conducted by a district magistrate. Vimochana women feel that this gain has been possible because of the solidarity and support expressed by other women in different places, who protested against the police violence on women in Bangalore.

SHAMIMA ISLAM

Aklima and May Day

THERE is no denying the fact that women constitute the most unappreciated inputs in the third world labour force. Not only do labour force statistics pay scant attention to the millions of women whose contributions go least acknowledged, but these women are also doubly oppressed because development planners fail to recognise the fact that women carry a double burden of work.

A multitude of factors determine whether or not people are able to avail of rights formally pronounced to be theirs. My interview with Aklima, who is one among millions, revealed that neither is she aware that she has a right to a holiday on May 1, nor does she wish to avail of this right. Aklima has a holiday not because the world respects this day as Labour Day but because there is a shortage of bricks to be pounded today. The contractor sent her a message that there was no work for the day as the new consignment of bricks has not yet arrived. However, on her way to market she walked an extra one and a half miles just to confirm whether this was actually the case. May Day is thus a forced holiday for her.

Holding her nine month old baby and a tattered grocery bag, Aklima stands nearby while I talk to Fulon who pounds left over bricks under a tree.

Aklima lives in a hut in a slum behind the Jame Masjid at Rayerbazar in Dhaka. About 12 years ago, she and her parents migrated to the city from Barisal district. Her father, who was working as a construction labourer, fell to the ground from the roof of a four storeyed building and died on the spot. Since then,



Aklima's mother has been working as a maidservant. Aklima says that the Bibisaheb is kind enough to let Aklima's mother and her youngest son sleep in the house at night. This allows Aklima's mother to save 70 taka out of her 100 taka salary, as she does not have to pay house rent. Aklima regrets that her mother does not have a house where she, the daughter, can go and stay for some time if she does not want to stay with her husband. “My father is dead and my mother works in other people's houses. I don't even have an elder brother. Being a woman, my luck is so bad.”

Aklima seems to be in her early twenties. She says she got married one year after national independence. She has two living children. Her eldest son, six years old, has to stay home all by himself when she goes out in the morning to earn money. For the last three years, Aklima has been working in the morning as a part time maidservant. Before her marriage, when her father died, she had started working as her mother's helper on construction sites.

Pointing to her nine month old son, she says : “This time, I started my work when he was only 10 days old. I could not bear starvation any more—*ghore kono khaon achilo na.*” Once, when her mother realised that Aklima was starving, she decided not to let her go back to her husband for some months. Aklima explains : “I was married only for my bare survival, so that I would get food and clothing. When this bare minimum was not available, why should my mother let me go back to my husband?”

Aklima's husband is also a day labourer in construction work. He moves all over the city wherever he can find work. He works from morning to 5 p.m. According to Aklima, he can pound 100 to 125 bricks a day. For 100 pounded bricks he is paid 12.50 taka, so his earnings are 12 to 15 taka a day. However, there is no guarantee that he will always find work. Usually, he gets work only 15 or 20 days in a month. He is supposed to buy food from his earnings but Aklima says that he spends more on his own food than on food for the family.

Aklima has never used any form of contraceptive because her husband did not allow her to do so. "Many people die after using it", he said, Aklima regretfully says: "I never realised that my material situation would deteriorate so much. Otherwise, I would have at least thought about using it."

Aklima can pound about 25 bricks in an afternoon. She thus earns approximately 3 taka. In the morning, she works as a maidservant in a neighbouring house. She gets 50 taka a month there, but no food. At noon, she goes home, eats a *roti* and gives one to her son, then walks to the worksite, taking both children with her. Throughout the afternoon, as she pounds bricks, the baby rests on her lap, clinging to her breasts. When she puts him down on the ground, she can feel a little relaxed. The presence of the two children makes it difficult for her to pound more bricks. Heaving a great sigh, she says: "I wish there was a little more shade on the roadside. Usually, young mothers with tiny children have to work in almost inhuman conditions on these worksites where you cannot find any form of shade anywhere."

Aklima feels grateful to her current employer who allowed her to take the baby to work in the morning, so that she could suckle him, when he was a new born. Aklima laid down this condition because she fully remembers how she lost her second son when she was at work in another house. Since she was not allowed to bring her one and a

half year old baby to the house where she worked previously, she used to leave him at home, in the care of her four year old son. One day she fed the baby at 11 a.m., left him asleep, and went to work. When she returned at 1 p.m. she could not find him anywhere. Later, he was found lying drowned in a nearby ditch. Sighing, she explains: "Probably he followed his brother to the ditch. He used to be attracted by the water hyacinths and must have fallen in without being noticed. I still do not know exactly what happened. This is just my guess."

Despite the bad working conditions Aklima prefers the construction job to domestic service, because "there is full independence. I don't have to work when I don't want to. Also, nobody can stop me from bringing my children to work. I lost my best looking child because I had to leave him alone." She was in tears as she said: "You sahebs ordinarily do not touch our dirty children. But the one I lost was so handsome that he looked like sahebs' children. Nobody could believe that he was my son. I lost him only because I went out to fill my stomach."

Of the various kinds of construction work available to women, Aklima prefers brick pounding work. She is not willing to work in roof construction since contractors do not let women engaged in that work bring their children to the worksite. Aklima says that these days more women prefer to work as construction labourers rather than as maidservants, even though domestic servants are often better paid, since they get food, clothing and shelter almost free, and can save their salaries. Aklima feels that domestic work is nothing but "constant slavery" where a woman does not have any freedom at all.

From her own meagre income of approximately 100 taka a month, Aklima has to pay 80 taka as house rent. She spends approximately 50 paise a day on the two children. As the baby does not now get breastmilk, she has to feed him with flour. Sometimes she buys him a little *gur*. She cannot spend anything

on herself. In a grim voice, she says: "Now I have to buy my husband clothes when he needs them." He quarrels almost every day with her, saying: "Why not? What is the use of your earning if I have to do everything myself?" She depends on other well to do women, usually the women of the house where she works as part time maidservant, for her own clothes. She says she has never had a new sari in her life.

At night she cooks fresh rice for dinner and plain *roti* for next day's breakfast and lunch. She has to buy three fifth seer of wheat from the ration shop every week with which she feeds the family twice a day. She pays for this from her own income. Sometimes she has to arrange for loans. Her husband only pays for the rice at night. She sighs and says: "If only rice price was a little lower."

Aklima feels bitter that her husband quarrels with her all the time, blaming her for his bad luck and his poverty. For the last few days she has started cooking separately. "Let me see if he improves", she says. She feels sad when her husband blames her even for feeding his people. She says: "I do not have relatives who come and eat in the house. It is his relatives who often come at mealtimes. Can I refuse to feed my in-laws when they come to visit? These days, I just look at them and sit tight. I am not going to cook for anybody."

She is planning to follow her neighbour's advice and hire a separate hut for herself. She can get one without any provision of water for 60 taka. She says: "For my own use, I can easily fetch a pot of water from the place where I work. Let him manage on his own." Aklima is quite aware that such an action would mean freeing him from any obligation. Yet she thinks this will offer a better quality of life for her since she will not be forced to quarrel every day. She thinks women can escape poverty only if they become part of the labour force and are able to earn. She aspires for the kind of job which will help her escape starvation and will also be free from drudgery. □