

‘KAMLA’



Kamla Cafe at IIMA

On August 17, 2022, IIMA got its own ‘Kamla’, thanks to Prof. Sanjay Verma's initiative. The cafe, the latest in the ‘Kamla’ series of cafes run by SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) Ahmedabad, is named after Prof. Kamla Chowdhry (1920-2006), IIMA’s first faculty member. This snippet by the IIMA Archives presents a document, prepared in March 2020 and updated in Aug 2022. It describes the story behind the name and Prof. Chowdhry's association with Elaben Bhatt (SEWA’s Founder) and SEWA.

‘KAMLA’ @ SEWA, AHMEDABAD

‘Kamla’. What’s in a name? In this case, a fascinating story. When SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s Association), Ahmedabad started a food and nutrition training centre in 2015, in Ahmedabad, it decided to honour one of its early supporters, Professor Kamla Chowdhry (1920-2006), IIMA’s first faculty member. Not just because the land on which the centre came up was located on a piece of land donated to it by Dr. Chowdhry, but also to recognize her long association with Elaben Bhatt, SEWA’s founder and SEWA’s activities. ‘Kamla’ was designed around the principles of “clean air, a green environment, and food made from marginal crops such as Bajri, Jowar and Jav (pearl millet, sorghum and barley) that have sustained our civilization for centuries.” According to SEWA, the “food and space offered allow one to reflect on the impact of our work on our life, our society and our planet. We call this Anubandh [meaning, in Gujarati, connectedness].”

The activity started as a lunch service for office-goers. Initially, SEWA members cooked nutritious lunch on demand and the office-goers collected their food. Very soon, seating arrangements had to be made at the Bodakdev site, and the menu expanded. By 2018 it was a regular café open to the public and a nutrition training centre for SEWA members. To the extent possible, the raw materials are procured directly from women farmers and agricultural workers in various parts of Gujarat. The Ahmedabad experience was replicated in five districts of Gujarat (Anand, Mehsana, Patan, Surendranagar and Sabarkantha) in 2019. In the Ahmedabad centre, about 75 women are engaged in the activity.

How did Dr. Kamla Chowdhry get interested in SEWA’s work? She had been acquainted with Elaben Bhatt, the founder of SEWA, when Elaben was with the Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad (TLA). Dr. Chowdhry was interested in women who were outside the purview of labour legislation, and this attracted her to the work Elaben was doing. Later, when SEWA grew out of the women’s wing of TLA and was formally registered as a trade union in 1972, Dr.

Chowdhry's association with Elaben and her work continued through her support for the organization. Dr. Chowdhry left IIM Ahmedabad in 1972, but during her days in the Ford Foundation and the National Wasteland Development Board, she arranged for support to SEWA's activities, especially its forestry campaign in Girnar, and its water and sanitation - related work. Two others closely associated with Kamla Chowdhry in learning from, and advising Elaben and SEWA, were Vina Mazumdar (1927-2013) and Devaki Jain. Reema Nanavaty, who heads SEWA, credits Dr. Chowdhry with a valuable piece of advice given to Elaben when SEWA was founded: "Do not keep it small." Dr. Chowdhry owned a small plot of land in Bodakdev, Ahmedabad and it was this land that she bequeathed to SEWA.

'KAMLA' @ IIMA: AN ADDENDUM

On August 17, 2022, IIMA got its own 'Kamla', thanks to a move initiated by Prof. Sanjay Verma of IIMA. At the opening ceremony, Jyotiben Macwan, General Secretary, SEWA, called the new café "our true tribute to late Dr. Kamla Chowdhry" and added, "May many 'Kamlas' open not just in Gujarat, but also in many more states and give livelihood to hundreds of SEWA members." Kapilaben Vankar, President of SEWA noted, "For the students of IIMA, 'Kamla' is a live model in practice of how the produce of farmers can reach the end customers directly. This is real *Anubandh* – where producers are linked directly to customers. We, the women, are only the owners and managers of the entire supply chain." Shantaben Paulbhai, Vice President of SEWA Gram Mahila Haat, had some information for IIMA, "Let me convey to the students and professors of IIMA that every plate of food you purchase contributes to the employment of at least six women members, who grow grain, spices, vegetables and fruits, and cook in our kitchens. Their families will earn food security." Shabnamben reiterated the value of wholesomeness: "Our 'Kamla' brings you nutritious food, we can assure you it is grown naturally - no chemical fertilisers or pesticides are used by our members."

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