
Sarala Behn: The Silent Crusader

by

*Bidisha Mallik**

Abstract: Mohandas K. Gandhi and his revolutionary ideas of nonviolent and equitable social and political reconstruction attracted many, particularly women, from around the world. While some preferred living and working in Gandhi's ashrams, there were others who worked more independently in remote regions of India and carried out the constructive work of Gandhi. One such dedicated constructive worker was Catherine Mary Heilemann, or Sarala Behn, as she is better known in India. In this paper, I argue that the socio-political ideas and value orientations of Sarala Behn in her fight against colonialism, imperialism, race and gender injustices did not begin or end with Gandhi, but had their formative roots in the various choices and encounters she made in the early phase of her life in England that led her to travel abroad to join the cause of Gandhi in India. Accordingly, this paper presents a brief biographical sketch of Sarala Behn outlining the key moments and turning points that helped shape her philosophy and practice and gave specificity to her individual contributions as an educationist and an activist, and her role as a European going to India. Additionally, this paper presents selected details of her nonviolent social work in colonial India amongst the natives and against British imperialist policies.

For woman is not undeveloped man,
But diverse
Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Princess*

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.
William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*

Hers was a struggle from the beginning¹. A peaceful struggle against all injustice and exploitation of defenseless people. An educator and an iconoclastic thinker, she fought patriarchy in her own terms challenging dogma, orthodoxy, and repression at

* Bidisha Mallik, lecturer at the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences (University of Washington, Tacoma), is currently working on a book project examining the contribution of two European associates of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Mira Behn (Madeleine Slade) and Sarala Behn (Catherine Mary Heilemann) to social development and environmental sustainability among mountain communities in India that created the Chipko (Hug the Tree) and Anti-Tehri Dam movements.

¹ This article is a variation of a chapter from my doctoral dissertation. Bidisha Mallik, *The Contribution of Mira Behn and Sarala Behn to Social and Environmental Transformation in the Indian State of Uttarakhand*, PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2014. All pictures in this article are edited by David M. Grimes for clarity and presentation.

every turn. She was a woman of indomitable will and forceful action, an indefatigable rebel against colonialism and imperialism, and a passionate critic of modern theories of economics and politics. The story of her life's struggles and her iron will to overcome them mirrors what she perceived and believed in Henley's famous lines above.

To thousands of hill women and men of the Indian Himalayas, this feisty English woman Catherine Mary Heilemann, was known as "Sarala Behn" or Sister Sarala². Interestingly, her name did not originate with Gandhi, unlike what many of her close friends and followers believed. Her autobiography makes it amply clear that some Indian colleagues used to address her as such when she came to India. But what is more, the philosophy and values which she adopted in her life and which gave her prominence in India as a Gandhian social worker did not begin with Gandhi either. Where did her values come from? And what prompted her to leave England for India? Her response to the question of a curious Indian villager, who wanted to know why she left her own country, may serve as self-explanatory:

Which path can solve the world's problems? Compassion can establish peace, co-operation, and dignity of labor on earth. But I felt that Western civilization cannot do this work. It is the search for an answer to this question; it is *this* [my emphasis] inspiration that brought me to India³.

These values and ideas populated her mind during her adolescent days in England.

Sarala Behn came to India in 1932 to join Gandhi's struggle against British rule, worked in India for fifty eventful years, and died there in 1982. A staunch follower of Gandhi's twin ideals of truth and nonviolence, her dedication and contribution to the cause of India's independence struggle and to Gandhi's constructive program through holistic education, her activism for environmental conservation, and her contribution to the uplift of women in the Uttarakhand Himalaya is legendary. To those who knew her saw her as a "person of rare integrity" and one who "practices exactly what she preaches"⁴. Yet little is known about her life to the outside world. Unlike Mira Behn, Gandhi's better known English associate, she did not have long periods of close affiliation with Gandhi, and as such, no significant correspondence with him exists. Having come from an economically and socially marginalized class in England also puts her in sharp contrast to that of Mira Behn, who hailed from the upper-class English gentry. This often led some to compare Mira Behn to "the Brahmin" and Sarala Behn to "the Baniya", referring wryly to the caste hierarchy prevalent in India⁵. In colonial India and thereafter, Sarala Behn worked in remote

² Sarala Behn signed her name as Sarala Devi in official letters and as an author. However, it is also the custom of Kumaoni culture where women addressed themselves as such instead of using last names of their father or husbands. Sarala Behn's use of this appellation thus recognizes her identification with and adoption of Kumaoni culture.

³ Dr. Hari Singh, *Diary*, in Shantilal Trivedi - Radha Bhatt (eds.), *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani 1984, p. 93.

⁴ Bill Aitken, *Sri Satya Sai Baba: A Life*, Penguin Books, New Delhi 2006, p. 14.

⁵ David Hopkins, Interview with author, Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani, 2011. This point was also raised by Rebecca Klenk as we happened to interview the same person.

areas of the Himalaya and lived like any other village woman. She was also known to have nurtured a strong dislike for publicity especially from outside media or people and instead preferred steady constructive work. “If we light a light it will spread itself”, she had often said to her students and co-workers⁶. Being a key organizer of Gandhian constructive *sarvodaya* (uplift of all) movements in Uttarakhand, when co-workers hailed her as their *neta* (leader), in her usual self-abnegatory style she would forcefully retort: *main neta nahin hoon bhai, main karyakarta hoon!* (I am not a leader, I am a worker!)⁷.

Sarala Behn’s autobiography⁸ and commemorative volumes dedicated to her by her students and followers and published posthumously⁹ are among the few surviving sources that offer some valuable details of her early life and struggles, her decision to come to India, and her constructive work and activism thereafter. The autobiography is helpful to the extent of understanding her work and her understanding of Gandhi’s philosophy but not her person, and thus she remains largely elusive to the reader because her writing, as she confesses, “rather than being introspective, is outward looking” with little information about the subtler “aspects of the inner soul, the spirit”¹⁰. Philology being her main interest, she was quick in learning a foreign language. But what is remarkable is that she wrote her autobiography in Hindi which carries proof of her greater degree of involvement with the native culture than any other western associate of Gandhi. However, at times her autobiography reads more like an ethnography given the great lengths she speaks about the people and cultures of the mountains where she worked. Amongst scholarly works, Rebecca Klenk, in a fascinating ethnographical study has explored Sarala Behn’s constructive work at the educational institute she founded in Uttarakhand, and its impact on the life and development of women in rural India¹¹. Klenk’s narrative is however, limited on the formative period of her childhood and youth and how she actively pursued and acted on the various spiritual and ethical ideals she made her own¹².

Available festschrift accounts are also of little avail as they are largely noncritical, reads Sarala Behn primarily in the light of Gandhi (i.e. as his ‘favorite disciple’ or ‘daughter’, without Gandhi ever acclaiming or adumbrating her as such), and treats her life, thought, and activism in a rather non-systemic and sketchy manner. This

⁶ Sushri Shobha Behn, *Mamatamayee Maa*, in Shantilal Trivedi - Radha Bhatt (eds.), *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 118.

⁷ Yogesh Bahuguna, Interview with author, May 7, 2017.

⁸ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds: Autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi’s English Disciple*, Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani 2010.

⁹ Shantilal Trivedi and Radha Bhatt (ed.), *Sarala Behn: Smriti Grantha*, Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani 1984; Sharada Vidushi, *Mahatma Gandhi ki Angrez Shishya Sarala Behn*. Nainital, Gyanodyaya Prakashan 2010; Prabha Pant, *Karmayogi Sarala Behn*, National Book Trust, New Delhi 2016.

¹⁰ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. XV.

¹¹ Rebecca Klenk, *Educating Activists: Development and Gender in the Making of Modern Gandhians*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK 2010.

¹² In a recent article, Klenk addresses this gap to some extent. Rebecca Klenk, *Gandhi’s Other Daughter- Sarala Devi and Lakshmi Ashram*, in “Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies”, 34, 1, 2014, pp. 94-104.

approach has helped propagate myths and confusion about the real person and her contributions casting her as often as a “blind follower” of Gandhi’s philosophy, but not as leader and initiator of novel social experiments and a path breaker in her own right¹³. Interestingly, the nature of this much popular *guru-disciple* discourse was quite alien to Gandhi’s own. Gandhi on no account accepted anyone as a disciple and flatly refused to be looked upon as a guru. He urged constructive workers not to blindly agree to all his ideas or to adhere to any ideology without putting them to their rigorous scrutiny of reason. As such, notions of discipleship immediately become suspect when we notice how often the views of so-called ‘disciples’ differed from Gandhi’s own.

This paper extends the thesis that Sarala Behn was not a typical follower of Gandhi but a visionary thinker in her own right. I focus on the moral-spiritual, existential, social, and cultural insights emerging from her early life in England that helped find her calling in life, the reasons that prompted this young European woman to leave her homeland to join Gandhi, and her contributions thereafter to India’s struggle for independence. This is important because the study of the history and political economy of a colonial and postcolonial world often tend to focus on abstract processes of macro-level philosophical analysis or textual exegesis ignoring micro-histories of subjectivity or biographical elements, subsuming thus the agency of individuals if any, particularly that of women. Second, a philosophical approach to biography is crucial because life as an “impressionable philosophical narrative”, “has its own specificities” in which thought processes and individual worldviews are not without ambiguities and inconsistencies. As a “dramatic process of (self)-formation, [and] (self)-knowledge,” life thus cannot be viewed “in a single linear perspective” or represented in a schematic manner¹⁴. Indeed, as Pierre Hadot pointed out, a philosophical biography would not merely be a narrative or a report on one’s life and beliefs, but a defense of the “mode of life” as a working union of thought and action and aimed at transforming one’s entire way of being¹⁵.

Thus, my approach to this biographical narrative is selective, non-linear, and non-thematic, and although I follow the rough chronology of her life, I do so to unveil both the internal and external drama and struggle Sarala Behn experienced as an activist, educator, and a philosopher in course of the various circumstances of her life. It is hoped that this narrative will help us reflect on the larger questions vital to contemporary interest, such as the role of biography that unite thought and the art of living in global encounters of cultures and social praxis, the role of the cosmopolitan

¹³ Sharon McDonald, who so kindly shared her work with me, has also cogently argued this point. In her biographical research on a group of western women who came to Gandhi during the colonial period, McDonald aptly emphasizes that in putting the stamp of an eastern notion of discipleship on these various western women, we fail to approach them from a western perspective. The latter, she observes, has maintained a certain distinction between discipleship and mentorship. Sharon McDonald, *Neither Memsahibs nor Missionaries: Western Women Who Supported the Indian Independence Movement*, PhD diss., University of New Brunswick, 2010.

¹⁴ Irina Polyakova, *Philosophical Biography Some Problems of Conceptualization*, in “Conserveries Memorielles”, 15, 2014, 1, p. 6, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://journals.openedition.org/cm/1753>

¹⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1999, p. 21; 30-31.

‘alien’ navigating in a foreign land, and that of individual spirituality in fostering communication and interdependence across and beyond static cultural worldviews.

Life in Britain

Catherine Mary Heilemann was born on 5 April 1901, in Fulham, southwest of London. Her mother, Emily Sinnock¹⁶ was English and her father, Otto Gottlieb Heilemann, a goldsmith of Lutheran faith and Swiss-German descent. She was named after her paternal grandmother, Katharina Heilemann¹⁷ who was from the village Ochsenwang in the Black Forest of Baden-Württemberg.

Heilemann’s father, born in Bern, had also stayed in France for some time with his parents before coming to England. Heilemann mentions in her memoir that she nurtured an open mind with regard to nation or language, her parents having come from diverse nationalities. Heilemann had a younger brother, Alfred¹⁸, and the two lost their mother when Heilemann was seven. Her grandmother Katharina took over the charge of the household and the care of the children. Of the two, Heilemann was the more rebellious type and her brother was quieter and loved his books and studies and somewhat disliked the intensity of her sister’s thoughts.

Heilemann adored her grandmother. Her boundless love gave all the support Heilemann needed during the darkest moments of her childhood and adolescence. She did not harbor such faith in her father. She also spoke of her father as very conventional in his outlook, concerned about niceties of social comportment etc., and as not being very successful in his trade, unable thus, to sufficiently provide for the family¹⁹. Given her father’s financial instability, the elderly Heilemann came to the aid of the family, managing not only the entire household but also contributing from her own life-savings. Inspired by her grandmother’s virtues, including her independent nature, honesty, strength to face life’s problems with courage and dignity, and her self-supporting life, Heilemann took them to her heart. Particularly her grandmother’s practical emphasis on the need for self-sufficiency had a seminal impact on Heilemann’s mind.

¹⁶ FamilySearch Family Tree. Under license to MyHeritage.com [online database]. Lehi, UT, USA: MyHeritage (USA) Inc. <https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-40001/familysearch-family-tree>

¹⁷ Switzerland Baptisms, 1491-1940, MyHeritage.com [online database]. Lehi, IT, USA: MyHeritage (USA) Inc. <https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-30090/switzerland-baptisms-1491-1940>

¹⁸ 1911 England & Wales Census, MyHeritage.com [online database]. Lehi, UT, USA: MyHeritage (USA) Inc. <https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10446/1911-england-wales-census>

¹⁹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 2.

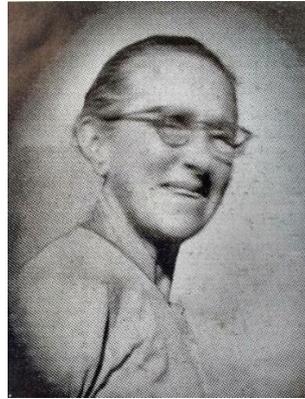


Figure 1: Catherine Mary Heilemann in her earlier times²⁰

Though a farmer's daughter, having come from the forested uplands of South Germany, her grandmother spent her entire life in the cities. "Yet," Heilemann recalled with pride, "she tended such a productive fruit-flower-cum- vegetable garden in the suburbs of London that it was hard for the people to believe that she was not a woman straight from the countryside"²¹. One day, while cooking, her grandmother accidentally burnt a piece of sandwich bread. It upset her for several days and she expressed her unhappiness to her granddaughter: "I feel as if I have burnt a child!" This incident had a profound impact on Heilemann's youthful mind and shaped her future thoughts. She wrote, "I believe from this birthed in me a love for nature and the idea that nature's production should be conserved, a concept that took a deep root into my very being"²². The twin ideals of *simplicity* and *economy* that Heilemann thus derived from her grandmother's teachings gave her a vision that later in her life culminated in her philosophy on nature²³.

The injustices that Heilemann and her family underwent during her childhood and adult days through the machinery of the state and society awoke her to its inherent contradictions in which political rivalry and imperial ambitions created enemies out of common people who were friendly neighbors. This happened during the First World War, when her father, originally born in Switzerland but who lived in England since his childhood was wrongly interned by the British as an enemy national due to a mix-up in his birth certificate. This particular incident completely outraged her. The experience made it plain to her that the "Law is an Ass" and she grew increasingly skeptical about political institutions and the government. It did not take her much to fathom that a minority family has become cornered by a majority society and in her mind she became restless to respond to this injustice. It is this

²⁰ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p.VI.

²¹ Sarala Devi, *Sanrakshan Ya Vinash?* Gyanodyaya Prakashan, Nainital 1981, p 14.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Shri Devi Puraskar, *Adbhut Vyaktitva: Behnji*, in Shantilal Trivedi - Radha Bhatt (eds.), *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 100.

feeling of restlessness that nurtured a profound sense of empathy and concern for the lives of those sections of society and communities who were minorities and oppressed²⁴. Apart from the unlawful detention of her father based on false claims of being an enemy ally, she could not reconcile to how common people of nations who were peaceful neighbors and friends could suddenly rise to the mindlessness of bloodshed and war at the armchair prompt of their respective governments. She began questioning war as an institution to settle disputes and conflicts. She expressed her distress in these words:

The new inhuman conception of total war, the spirit of reprisals, all struck home as sheer stupidity to one who could not accept current theories of economics and politics as gospel, but weighing them in the balance of common sense and finding them wanting was therefore categorized as an enemy of the nation. People were prepared to accept that if on a certain day, the rulers of two countries sign documents declaring themselves at war, it is the bounden duty of citizens of both countries to set about killing one another, even if until yesterday they had regarded themselves as friends. ... Is it good sound common sense? It didn't seem to me²⁵.

The bombing of east London during the war and the unreason of it weighed heavily on her young mind, "it was in violation of all the accepted rules of war" which she read in her history books that wars should be fought beyond populated areas to inflict no injury on ordinary citizens. When instead of denouncing the act there were counter attacks on Berlin and on German women and children living in Britain, she was astonished: "Why was it that respectable people of society were not able to recognize the simple truth that when two wrongs are joined together, the outcome cannot be right?"²⁶. She felt concerned for the children of those committing mass murders: "When those who are killing on a mass scale and thereby making other children orphans would return to their homes, what would be the impact of these people on the moral growth of their own children?"²⁷. While her grandmother's prudent advice to practice reticence in troubled times made sense to her, Heilemann's speculative and formative mind was already in search for a constructive, organized, and effective means to fight injustice²⁸.

As a budding social activist, pacifist, and revolutionary, her perceptive teenage mind began to question not only politics but also religion. Her grandmother, having a Lutheran background, exposed her to a non-conformist denomination and Heilemann began attending a Congregational Church as a child. However, she could not comprehend many aspects of organized religion. She was not interested in church liturgies and doctrinal creed, but was attracted to the stories of the life of Jesus, his fundamental teachings of love, nonviolence, truth, and compassion. The work of Christian missionaries had an impact on her, and she harbored a secret desire to become a missionary one day. The onslaught of the war however, made her question her faith, disenchanting her about organized faith and institutional religion and made

²⁴ Ivi, p. 99.

²⁵ Sarala Devi, *Revive Our Dying Planet: An Ecological, Socio-economical and Cultural Appeal*, Gyanodyaya Prakashan, Nainital 1982, p. 4.

²⁶ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., pp. 3-4.

²⁷ Sarala Devi, *Sanrakshan Yan Vinash?* cit., p. 11.

²⁸ Shri Devi Puraskar, *Adbhut Vyaktitva: Behnji*, cit., p. 99.

her see its connection to nationalism. The Bible taught her that Christianity was about turning the other cheek. But she was appalled that despite the inhumanity of the war, the religious priests of both sides prayed for the victory over the enemy nation. “I just could not understand which side would have its prayers answered by the poor Almighty”, she exclaimed. This made her aware of what she called the “double standards of morality” preached by pastors, who upheld killing as many men as possible in a war to vanquish the enemy, while in the same breath condemn murder as a terrible crime²⁹. The futility of armed conflict and church bigotry disillusioned her, and Heilemann refused to go to church. Her grandmother, who supported her in her questioning of the inanity of war, did not support this decision of her grandchild. As Heilemann began to get increasingly suspicious of religious rituals and liturgies she argued with her pious grandmother over such matters. She refused to accept the teaching that bread and wine when consecrated becomes the body and blood of Christ³⁰. Her conscience and insistence on common sense led her to repudiate such teachings, refrain from partaking in the either Holy Communion or preparing for Confirmation, leading her finally to stop attending church. Acceptance of any creed without verifying it in one’s own life and conscience became a dogma to her, apt to discountenance. However, though her spirit rebelled against institutional religion, Heilemann did not lose faith in Christ’s universal precepts of love, truth, and non-violence.

Soon afterwards, Heilemann was to face another traumatic experience that would significantly impact her vocational future. As a brilliant student, Heilemann had received scholarships for high school. She made good progress in languages, history, and mathematics and was about to win another to go on to university, when events took a different turn. The headmistress of her school, who did not endorse Heilemann’s lack of nationalistic fervor, told her:

Listen Catherine, it has been decided that as your family are on the enemy side, you cannot receive a scholarship. This decision is also the right one for, as you are not helping in the war effort, you can give more time to study and therefore have a much better chance of winning than those girls who are active in the war effort.

This statement stunned her, not because of the denial of scholarship but because of the reasons. Distrustful of higher education she wondered, “what was the point of such people as the headmistress gaining a higher education, when they did not concern themselves with Truth and Untruth, and when they felt no pain whatsoever in causing suffering to their own children’s minds”³¹. This incident compelled her to abandon her studies at a young age of sixteen and search for employment. With her being classed as an “enemy”, this search proved a challenging venture, but she eventually landed on the job of an office clerk. “The picture of the future”, she wrote

²⁹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., pp. 4-5.

³⁰ Ibidem. Though Congregationists do not believe in transubstantiation, given that Heilemann also had a strong Lutheran influence owing to her grandmother, the emphasis here appears to be on consubstantiation (as some Lutherans define) that the Body and Blood of Christ are substantially present ‘in, with, and under the forms’ of consecrated bread and wine.

³¹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 5.

in her autobiography, “that I had kept before me had been crushed, and my personal despair slowly began to assume the form of revolt against society”³².

The injustice, discrimination, hypocrisy, social ostracism, and the widening gap between belief and practice that she witnessed during her days in London drove her to seek inner peace and consolation amidst nature. Heilemann had earlier developed a strong distaste for science subjects taught at her school like botany and geography. However, as she turned to nature for peace, she discovered, “These long rambles in the spring and autumn woods, the wondrous clouds at sunset and dawn, fleeting sunshine and shadow over the green countryside, opened a new vision which school-taught botany and geography had failed to give”³³. She considered that visions of a peaceful way of life with nature, which specialists teaching and theorizing evidently lack, “can be communicated by living contact, by experience, not by word of mouth or written word”³⁴. This realization of the value of experiential learning over the mere intellectual or factual and her striving to put these ideals into action later played a significant role in attracting Heilemann to the progressive education program of Gandhi, *Nai Talim*³⁵.

London in the early twentieth century was witnessing an intense and unprecedented phase of industrial and suburban growth. Heilemann did not find anything appealing or worth emulating in this rushed lifestyle. Instead, it made her seriously reflect on the goal of humanity’s ambition and means to achieve progress. She penned her earliest thoughts on this:

Coming into close contact with factories I only became even more disturbed. Seeing the unnatural environment of the factory, the deafening noise, the people made slaves by the sheer speed of machines, I suffered a lot. The thought came to me that when I make use of items produced in these factories, in a way, I too am part of this inhuman process³⁶.

Appalled by the noise, competition, rush, and deteriorating human relationships of modern industrial life, she wondered, “Was it for all of this that humanity exists?” The embracing of material goods and subsequent giving up of human values deeply disturbed her and she developed an aversion toward western materialistic civilization. Anticipating Gandhi, Heilemann became an unrelenting critic of modern economic theories and when she discussed these matters with others they called her anti-national or believed her to be insane. Under these circumstances the only option was to choose to remain a social outcaste, which she did. She sought relief in the countryside and as her fondness for the beauty of nature and a peaceful way of life increased it led her “think about leading a life among the fields and forests”³⁷.

³² Sarala Devi, *Revive Our Dying Planet*, cit., p. 5.

³³ Ivi, p. 4.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 3.

³⁵ Literally translated, *Nai Talim* is New Education. It was the Basic Education Program proposed by Gandhi in 1937, an alternative to the colonial system of education as well as a critique of the larger colonial and modernist political-economic structures.

³⁶ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 8.

³⁷ Sarala Devi, *Preface*, in *Sanrakshan Yan Vinash*, cit., p. 12.

After the First World War, when her father returned home following his release from detention, Heilemann lost her beloved grandmother. This personal loss, threw her life into utter loneliness and despair. She gave up interest both at home and at her workstation, and following a petty argument with her religious-minded father over whether washing could be hung outdoors to dry during Sabbath, she left home, discontented and unhappy.

This marked a turning point in her life. While living in London on her own working as an office clerk, Heilemann came in touch with people from other parts of Europe, who shared many of her interests and views. At the same time she became conscious of the “color prejudice” that existed amongst her English peers, which deeply troubled her. However, at the international society where she had her quarters in 1926-27, Heilemann came to know a few Indian students, among who was one, Mohan Singh Mehta. Very soon, Heilemann and Mehta became close friends. Mehta often had discussions with Heilemann about the constructive role that women should play in society to address poverty, injustice, and inequality rather than ‘waste’ one’s life doing a white-collar job in an office environment. This infuriated Heilemann and she engaged in heated arguments with Mehta³⁸. However, Mehta’s words began making some sense to her when she became dissatisfied with her clerical position. About this time from Mehta and other students Heilemann also learnt about Indian politics and the nonviolent movement of Gandhi. She became once more aware of the faulty education she received in her school days, reflecting on which she wrote:

Imperialism and colonialism were presented to me in a new light. In our history books Indians were always referred to within the context of ‘The White Man’s Burden.’ Now, though, I began to understand that we were in India, not for the benefit of the people there, but for their exploitation, and that having destroyed their culture we now sought to impose our own³⁹.

Heilemann began to take active interest in the nationalist movement in India and read about the work of prominent leaders of the Indian renaissance movement. When she learnt about Gandhi’s constructive program for self-sufficiency, she could not be more convinced. This was a nonviolent and transformative social praxis aimed at fostering alternative conditions of living within socially sustainable, economically self-reliant, and self-governing local communities which he called *gram swaraj* (village republics). Gandhi’s character and philosophy gave Heilemann’s “rebellious thoughts” a creative focus⁴⁰. She found Gandhi’s methods “not simply a practical means of revolt against some foreign government, colonialism, or imperialism, but rather a step taken in opposition to the direction of the machine age that devalued human existence”. “For the first time in my life, I was exposed to ideas that resonated within me”, she affirmed⁴¹. Heilemann also found Gandhi’s principle of *satyagraha* or nonviolent noncooperation movement against injustice spiritually appealing, and saw in it an alternative to the violence and bloodshed that she experienced during the war. It awakened in her, a passion to peacefully fight for justice that lay dormant

³⁸ Mohan Singh Mehta, *Kumari Heilemann*, in *Uttar Ke Shikharon Me Chetana Ki Ankoor*, cit., p. 107.

³⁹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 12.

⁴⁰ Sarala Devi, *Sanrakshan Yan Vinash?* cit., p. 15.

⁴¹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., pp. 12-13.

within for several years. Thus, she considered Gandhi's emphasis on truth and nonviolence as a pertinent solution to the problems of modern economic theories and "a long stride in advance of Marx"⁴². By 1929, these ideas concretized in her mind and she began thinking of going to India⁴³. Meanwhile, in India, Gandhi began his famous Salt March in 1930 to protest against the unjust tax on salt imposed by the British. It had a profound impression on her. The news of the exemplary and unflinching bravery of men and women suffering hardship of every kind like *lathi* charges, gruesome police brutality, and courting arrest, made her feel "as if the spirit of Christ had been reawakened in a non-Christian land. It now seemed that the desire I had had in my childhood to become a missionary had found a new direction. I now considered going to India to be part of the movement for national education through constructive activities in spinning, removal of untouchability, and promoting health and hygiene"⁴⁴.

Heilemann's friends and relatives in England became alarmed. They tried to persuade her to drop her idea of going to India, a country with climate, people, and culture different from her own. But Heilemann remained firm. Her spirit was not to be dampened even when she received a reply to her letter from Gandhi who advised her against coming stating that most westerners were not able to conform to the way of life in India. Undeterred, she decided to undertake some practical training so that she could go to India with the idea of practicing that skill. She took training in midwifery, undertook a correspondence course in commerce etc. in course of which she came in close contact with spiritual-pacifist groups like the Quakers and the British socialist organization, Fabian Society. She was greatly consoled to learn that they were equally in favor of creating a new society through revolution, an idea, which resonated with her own political and social thoughts.

During this time, probably between 1930 and 1931, Mehta, who had been in correspondence with Heilemann ever since he left London after his studies, reached out to her from India. He asked her services in accounting and to teach students in a new progressive school he had established in Udaipur of Rajasthan in western India. Heilemann understood from their initial correspondence that the school would be run based on Gandhi's ideals. She agreed to the proposal, left her course in midwifery and took a course in child education instead, to prepare herself.

When Gandhi arrived in London for the Round Table Conference in 1931, Heilemann attempted to meet him twice but in vain. Understanding that time has not come for her to meet Gandhi, she concentrated on her preparations to leave for India. On January 4, 1932, soon after Gandhi's departure from England, Heilemann set sail from Liverpool for India, never to return.

⁴² Sarala Devi, *Revive Our Dying Planet*, cit., p. 4.

⁴³ Sarala Devi, *Vidroha se Nirman tak ki Yatra*, in *Uttaron Ke Shikharon Me Cheta Ki Ankoor*, cit., pp. 85-86.

⁴⁴ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 14.

In India

In India, Heilemann worked for four and a half years at Vidya Bhavan, the progressive school at Udaipur, founded on the idea of “social reconstruction through education”⁴⁵. She was already familiar with and inspired by the work of early 20th century thinkers of alternative education in the west, such as Ellen Key, Maria Montessori, Paul Geheeb, Rudolf Steiner, A.S. Neill, and John Dewey. Most of these progressive thinkers on education argued for child-centered holistic education that could counter the effects of industrial urban life and that emphasized learning through practical experience than rote memorization. During her days at Udaipur, Heilemann also read about Gandhi’s early experiments in the field of education and was much drawn to his emphasis on practical knowledge such as linking productive work with education that was aimed at preparing nonviolent workers for the attainment of an exploitation-free and egalitarian society.

At Vidya Bhavan, Heilemann was mainly responsible for teaching the junior section of the school and running a hostel of a dozen young children who lived with her⁴⁶. However, she found out that although focused on social reform and child psychology, the educational approach was merely reformatory and not progressive. For instance, despite the general poverty of the state of Rajasthan in which Vidya Bhavan was situated, the school catered only for the relatively well-off, middle class, and higher caste children and not the poor and deprived of the villages. The other thing which bothered her was that while oriented to bringing reform in education, the syllabus taught was not practically oriented toward the needs of society. What was more, English was taught and there was a tendency for its preference to the native vernacular.

These issues aside, the accounting work and teaching at the Udaipur school did not leave her with any opportunity to do two things she felt was necessary if she was to participate in Gandhi’s constructive program: learn Hindi and spinning. It was Gandhi’s vision for an alternate society which drew her to India and her objective was to serve India through those ideals which the Udaipur school obviously did not fulfill.

Despondent, she sought to channelize her energy elsewhere. Her sympathies went toward the depressed classes suffering social discrimination such as Harijans (lower castes), Muslims, and especially women whom she saw were categorically disregarded by the more competent and powerful communities⁴⁷. Eager to play a part in the moral and social reform, Heilemann took keen interest in the women’s cause. She saw that not only were the women deprived of education, but also they were kept in seclusion under the *purdah*⁴⁸ system, having thus, no constructive role to play in society outside the home. Along with like-minded others,

⁴⁵ Sarala Devi, Letter to Shri P.N. Sanwal, August 5, 1942, in *Sarala Behn: Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 303.

⁴⁶ Sarala Devi, Letter to P.N. Sanwal, August 5, 1942, in *Sarala Behn: Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 303.

⁴⁷ Shri Devi Puraskar, *Adbhut Vyaktitva: Behnji*, cit., p. 99.

⁴⁸ *Purdah* is literally a veil. *Purdah* as a system is a segregation of the sexes in northern and western India where Hindu women wore a veil, i.e. *purdah* to cover their faces, necks, and bodies.

Heilemann began urging purdah-clad women to come out from their reclusive world and spoke openly against such practices that bound women to servitude. But she saw that the root cause of such repression of women and minorities were the ultra-conservative orthodox customs and superstitions and rigors of caste purity.



Figure 2: Sarala Behn (Heilemann) at Udaipur Vidya Bhavan: She is seen sitting (fifth from left) beside Shri Mohan Singh Mehta (to her left) founder of Vidya Bhavan and other teachers, 1932⁴⁹.

Furthermore, her experience as a child psychologist helped her see that the group worst affected from such practices were none but the children. “False beliefs”, she remarked, “take root in childhood from conversations overheard in the home, and eventually become the causes of growing national and international problems”⁵⁰. For some time she worked energetically together with her women colleagues to free the children from “lifeless and meaningless traditions” that she believed imprisoned their personality and stymied their growth. However, she realized that efforts “were not getting to the root of the evil. As a result, feelings of despondency and dissatisfaction began to creep into my mind”⁵¹.

Not finding solace in the institution-bound teaching work or social reform at Udaipur, she began travelling to other parts of North India to learn about Gandhian educational experiments. She found one Dakshinamurti Vidyarathi Bhavan

⁴⁹ Neema Vaishnava, *Sarala Behn with Shri Mohan Singh Mehta, founder of Vidya Bhawan (left) and her fellow teachers. Udaipur, 1932*, David Hopkins Private Collection.

⁵⁰ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 36.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 38.

(Dakshinamurti Student Home), the institute at Bhavnagar set up by an educationist Gijubhai Badheka and its philosophy similar in many respects to Gandhi's Nai Talim⁵². The educational experiment at Dakshinamurti offered a refreshing alternative to that at Udaipur. Heilemann noted that their method was student-centric and participatory based on learning through practical work and free from the orthodox and statist culture of official education. Moreover, the students were self-sufficient and rendered bodily labor.

Instruction was in the vernacular, and was oriented to becoming volunteers to serve their country. Here was an example that strongly appealed to her. She liked the indigenous and locally suited approach of the Dakshinamurti model meant for carving out revolutionaries. As she said, she had come to India not with the dream of a social reformer but that of a revolutionary, working in Gandhi's constructive program, the real basis of the freedom struggle, one that prepared nonviolent workers to serve the nation and its people⁵³.

Sarala Behn

It was at some point during her Udaipur days, Heilemann became known by her Indian name, *Sarala*⁵⁴ Behn, given to her by her Indian comrades⁵⁵. In 1935, as Sarala Behn, she went to visit the Mahila Ashram or Women's Institute⁵⁶ at Wardha, which was preparing women workers for community service, for further guidance in the kind of educational work she was interested in. It was during this time that she came to meet Gandhi, at his ashram in Maganwadi, Wardha. The visit opened up new horizons for Sarala Behn. Maganwadi at that time was the vanguard of Gandhi's experiments in rural-based industries. Sarala Behn participated in village sanitation work (then organized by Mira Behn at Sindi) and learnt the art of spinning cotton and the economic and moral basis of the various constructive activities and experiments aimed at village uplift. These experiences at Wardha were eye opening to Sarala Behn as they taught her what it takes to be a constructive social revolutionary. Until then, she realized, she was only a reformer, not yet a revolutionary⁵⁷.

The Wardha experience prompted Sarala Behn to leave Udaipur in May 1936. She now turned to Gandhian constructive work but found it lacking in the way it was

⁵² Girija Shanker Bhagwanji Badheka, popularly known as Gijubhai (1885-1939) was one of the early pioneers of educational experiments for children in India and his work attracted Gandhi's attention before he implemented his Nai Talim. Badheka was in turn, inspired by the theories of Maria Montessori and played a major role in implementing such ideas while molding them to the Indian socio-cultural and local context. Yogesh K. Singh, *Philosophical Foundation of Education*, APH Publishing, New Delhi 2008.

⁵³ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 36.

⁵⁴ Sarala is the feminine for simple and honest in Hindi.

⁵⁵ No one really knows when and how she began using this Indian name, as she left no clues in her autobiography or with her students and followers.

⁵⁶ The Institute was founded by Jamnalal Bajaj, a philanthropist and freedom fighter and also a close associate of Gandhi, who seemed to be interested in women's education.

⁵⁷ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 48.

implemented. Living with the women and girls at the Women's Institute she came to observe first hand many of the conditions that existed within the institute and was not satisfied with what she found. The whole aura seemed to her forced and artificial. She noted that several of Gandhi's followers could not implement his ideals on education in its true spirit, thus creating a joyless and artificial atmosphere with no connection whatsoever between life and education. Work at the ashram, she remarked: "was not imbued with a feeling of devotion to labor, only a sense of discipline"⁵⁸. However, during this time, two gifted progressive educators, E.W. Aryanayakam and his wife Asha Devi, had joined Gandhi to assist him in this new experiment of Nai Talim. Following their inspiration and Gandhi's encouragement, Sarala Behn joined the Hindustani Talimi Sangh (All-India Board of Education), the Basic Education scheme at Gandhi's ashram at Sevagram endorsed by the Indian National Congress in 1938. This novel experimental education, included in Gandhi's constructive program, implies that "all the various branches of knowledge will be imparted either through a basic productive activity, or else in surroundings close to society and nature". Thus, instead of "Production alongside Education" Gandhi's system, she observed, launched a method of "Education through Production"⁵⁹. While this new responsibility brought her close to Gandhi, Sarala Behn preferred to live and work independently in a village to serve the masses and the "institution-bound teaching work" did not satisfy her: "I was for ever saying to people that arrangements be made so that I might live in some village"⁶⁰. However, Gandhi was not in favor of her leaving Sevagram. For this she earned the displeasure of many at Sevagram because she did not agree with Gandhi on every count⁶¹. Soon, the intense heat at Sevagram, the heavy workload, dysentery, and recurrent bouts of malaria took a serious toll on her health. Her stubbornness in using only naturopathy further delayed her recovery from malaria. Gandhi later lauded Sarala Behn for her resoluteness in refusing mainstream medicine. But while Gandhi's denial was motivated by the religious symbolism of an ascetic disregard for the body and belief in the indivisibility of the *Atman* (Soul/Self), to Sarala Behn holistic cure made a better practical sense because conventional medicine, she believed, led to toxic effects on the human body⁶². As part of her own plan for treatment, she began searching for a cooler location where she could regain her health and work towards developing Gandhi's constructive program on education. Incidentally, she heard about a Gandhi ashram at Chanauda, a hill town in Almora district of the Uttarakhand Himalayas which worked to promote woolen spinning and weaving as well as trained nationalists to fight the colonial rule. In August 1941, on Gandhi's encouragement she decided to settle at this place to recuperate and start her own project. But leaving Gandhi, her Sevagram 'family', and the children there whom she loved dearly was

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 52.

⁵⁹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 55.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ Sarala Devi, *Vidroha Se Nirman Tak Ki Yatra*, cit., p. 88.

⁶² Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 173.

not easy for her. She recalls: “It felt as if I was renouncing the world to go and live in the forest”⁶³.

In the mountains

Following Gandhi’s advice she spent a year familiarizing with the local conditions and the people. The mountain air soon improved her health. Together with the founder of the Chanauda Ashram and her close friend, Shanti Lal Trivedi, she hiked up to the interior of the Kumaon hills covering hundreds of arduous miles in the *Bhotiya*⁶⁴ region and border districts of the then United Provinces such as Jouhar, Munsyari, Choudans, Vyas, and Dharchula. Realizing the potential for hand-spun wool work in the hills, she bought Tibetan wool for spinning and on her way took part in the selling of *Khadi*⁶⁵ or hand-spun cotton, lived with the village people, acquainted herself with the language, religion, and culture of the land, studied the socioeconomic conditions and political awareness of the people, and then tried to organize women’s meetings. It was during these long journeys by foot as described in her autobiography that Sarala Behn came to encounter for the first time the hardworking women of the hills.

While she saw that women of the hills do not practice purdah and have freedom to work in public places, she found in them a lack of self-confidence when the need came to speak out against moral and social wrongs. She also became aware of the sharp discrepancy in the sexual division of labor in the traditional agri-pastoral communities of the mountains. While only men did the plowing and managed irrigation of the fields, the women did practically all agricultural operations working in their “fields and their forests in sun, rain and frost, weeding, harvesting, carrying heavy loads of fuel, fodder and litter, from early dawn to falling dusk, to sustain their family”⁶⁶. Yet, she noted that the women, while taking their life as a matter of course were not ready to relinquish their right to work in the fields and instead took pride in it⁶⁷. This made her aware of the pivotal role of women in hill economy and society. To initiate a conversation, she often met them in the fields where they worked, instructed them on childrearing and housework and “would even go to the extent of combing their hair and picking lice”⁶⁸. But despite her efforts, she realized painfully, the village ladies did not show any interest in constructive work or in their own social and moral progress. When called for a meeting, they would say, “What do we know,

⁶³ Ivi, p. 81.

⁶⁴ Bhotiya refers to the nomadic pastoralists of the Indo-Tibetan border region, which was part of the United Provinces in British India. The Bhotia people moved into India when borders were closed in 1962.

⁶⁵ Khadi is the name for hand-spun cotton. Spinning weaving, and wearing of khadi was part of Gandhi’s constructive program for village self-reliance and implied communal unity and economic freedom of the masses from British imperialism.

⁶⁶ Sarala Devi, *What is Development?*, in *Himalaya: Man and Nature*, June 1977-May 1978, p. 11.

⁶⁷ Sarala Devi, “The Women of the UP Hills”, July 18, 1974, Shobha Vidyarthi Private Collection.

⁶⁸ G.R. Kala, *Sarla Behn’s Trial*, in *Sarla Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 316.

we are only destined to labor like animals. Meetings and other such things are meant for men not for us”⁶⁹.

This poor show of self-confidence and self-respect convinced Sarala Behn of the urgency of the need to address the cause of the women in the hills. She reckoned, “the development of women’s power is ... one of the main duties of our village workers, so that it may become a force not merely for agriculture and dairy production, but for the true development of a healthy society”⁷⁰. Thus she asserted, the “extension of the power of the women from service of the family to service and regeneration of society is a ‘must’”⁷¹.



Figure 3: Sarala Behn with Shantilal Trivedi, at Narayan Ashram, Dharchula in 1941⁷²

While she did not see clearly yet whether or how she could help the local women, she understood that sustained and direct contact with the village women was an imperative to bring any change. Thus, her experiences in the various villages concretized in her mind the need for a fixed place from where she could work⁷³. A small house on a hilltop in Kausani was donated to her by a social worker, who had named it after his wife Lakshmi, for her use in constructive activities. This eventually became known as Lakshmi Ashram.

⁶⁹ Vimla Bahuguna, interview with author, Dehradun April 14, 2011.

⁷⁰ Sarala Devi, *What is Development?*, cit., p. 11.

⁷¹ Sarala Devi, “A Practical Strategy Towards Conservation and Decentralized Responsibility”, Shobha Vidyarthi Private Collection.

⁷² “Shantilalji ke saath Narayan Ashram me” [Sarala Behn with Shantilalji, Narayan Ashram], 1941, in Shantilal Trivedi and Radha Behn (eds.), *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, Kausani, Lakshmi Ashram; New Delhi, Himalaya Seva Sangh 1984.

⁷³ Sarala Devi, Letter to P.N. Sanwal, August 5, 1942, in *Sarala Behn: smriti grantha*, 304.

Political and social activism

Meanwhile, the Quit India Resolution was passed and all Congress activists were arrested, following which a leaderless nation tuned to fever pitch action in demand of a free India. The movement quickly reached the hills and wanton police repression in the form of arrests, beatings, whippings, and firings went rife. Sarala Behn, who intended to carry out her constructive activities, realized that her self-respect demands that she disobey Gandhi's instructions that western supporters of the constructive program should not take part in political activities. She considered "only if the situation became intolerable, as once was the case with Mira Ben [*sic*], should I deliberately court arrest"⁷⁴.



Figure 4. Sarala Behn in khadi sari, 1942⁷⁵

The nature of British repression in the hills indeed seemed intolerable to Sarala Behn and like Mira Behn, she played an active part in political and social activism during the Quit India movement. There were open firings on nonviolent processions at Sult, Salam, and Deghat regions of Almora district and flagitious crimes committed on the villagers everywhere such as looting of property, ghoulis torture and killing of farm animals, and burning down of houses, agricultural implements, and standing crops⁷⁶. In one village of Salam all men were arrested and imprisoned while the women and children fled taking refuge in the forests or in caves⁷⁷. At that

⁷⁴ Sarala Devi, "Letter to Shri P.N. Sanwal", May 8, 1942, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 305.

⁷⁵ Sarala Behn, *A Life In Two Worlds*, cit., cover page.

⁷⁶ Govind Sahai, *42 Rebellion*, Rajkamal Publications, Delhi 1947, p. 266; Pratap Singh Bora, *Salam Kranti me Sarala Behnji*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 175.

⁷⁷ Pratap Singh Bora, *Salam Kranti me Sarala Behnji*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 175.

time, the Chanauda ashram was the power house of nationalist movement in the hills. The deputy commissioner of Almora reported to the commissioner of Kumaon region warning that as long as the Chanauda Gandhi ashram operates it will be difficult for the British to rule⁷⁸.

On September 2, 1942, on false charges of arson attack on a government resin depot at Totashilling, a conspiracy of the local revenue officer and head of the police station, all fifteen workers of the ashram including several villagers were arrested, property confiscated and auctioned, and the ashram sealed. The district judge further imposed individual fines on those arrested to be imprisoned as well as a collective fine of Rs. 30,000 on the villagers, seven times the annual revenue of that area⁷⁹. The incident shocked Sarala Behn. She took it as her duty towards humanity that she should stand between the people and this ongoing tyranny and oppression of the British.

To protest this injustice, Sarala Behn prepared a petition and collecting one *anna*⁸⁰ from each family of the villages of Almora to fund her trip, set out to see the English commissioner, Mr. Acton, in Nainital. There she met eye to eye with the British officer requesting the release of those imprisoned with these words of solidarity: “I have come with the humble request that justice be done for the sake of humanity, for those who are innocent, so that future history does not stigmatize the English for doing this injustice to people”⁸¹.

Her audacious words queered the overweening commissioner who threatened to send all ashramites to the gallows. As per reports from her close acquaintances, the commissioner later hounded the home of a local nationalist where Sarala Behn had put up with the intention of shooting her for the ‘crime’ of opposing the British government despite being a British⁸². Lacking a search warrant the haughty officer however, could not carry out his desired plan of action.

Disappointed but determined to fight for truth and justice, Sarala Behn drafted appeals and went to court as political trials were conducted deceitfully in constructed tents outside prisons. Her appeals and statements disclosed the case as a false one based on spurious witnesses which saved the death sentence of one accused and helped in reducing the fines of others though their term in prison remained unaffected⁸³. Sarala Behn realized that incarceration, and eventual death sentences of the political prisoners directly impacted their families with heavy fines and auction of their land, crop, and properties; in addition to the fear or pain of losing their loved ones. She witnessed British ‘fair play’ and how colonial administration could reduce once prosperous farming families of the hills to paupers. The suffering of these families tormented her day and night. She collected food grains and money

⁷⁸ Shanti Lal Trivedi, *Mere Jail Jeevan Ki Yaadein* [Memories of My Life in Jail], Sanskriti Vibhag Uttarakhand, Dehradun 2014, p. 22.

⁷⁹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 165

⁸⁰ Currency unit used in British India.

⁸¹ Shanti Lal Trivedi, Anupam Vyaktitva, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 168.

⁸² Shri Balvant Rai Tayal, *Sarala Behn ke Prati*, and Banke Lal Consul, *Daliton ke Sakha: Sarala*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 158; 181.

⁸³ Shantilal Trivedi, “Seva Murti Sarala Devi”, *Uttarakhand Smarika*, cit., p. 39.

from various sources and began touring several villages in Baurari, Katyur, Salam, and Sult areas of Almora and Pithoragarh districts, reassuring and extending help in all form to the troubled families of imprisoned activists.

Along with co-worker Trivedi, she carried out an elaborate relief work for nearly two months and at times covering twenty-two miles on foot in a day on mountainous terrain⁸⁴. To avoid police interventions as well as save money on bus fares, she journeyed for three days from Kausani to Almora, covering some fifty-eight miles through dense forests and treacherous terrain of the hills. Other times, she traveled to the plains in Bareilly, Lucknow, and Agra to meet prisoners languishing in jail, brought them news from their homes, and sought help from able lawyers for their release.

Soon Sarala Behn was put under house arrest at her place in Kausani for helping native political revolutionaries. She defied imperial orders and carried on with her humanitarian relief work. True to the principles of nonviolent noncooperation, she informed the District Magistrate every time she left home. Sooner or later, she was arrested when she was on her way to Allahabad to appeal at the high court for the release of political prisoners⁸⁵. A trial was held at Almora and she was incarcerated for a period of three months.

On her release from prison, Sarala Behn resumed her activities to reach out to the families of freedom fighters. Along with Trivedi, who in the meantime was also released, she went to Lucknow, Wardha, and Bombay on a fund-raising tour and collected a sum of Rs. 45,000 by September 1944 for distribution⁸⁶. To avoid trouble from British intelligence agents Sarala Behn, in her usual way, traveled in the night through the woods to reach Almora before dawn.

Her associates vividly recall how on reaching Almora, she would immediately hide herself by climbing a tree, visit the villagers' homes only at nightfall, and sleep in someone's cow-shed until daybreak when she would go into her hiding again. Like a true missionary, she traveled from village to village, consoling distraught families of those incarcerated who were left high and dry without any resource or means of survival, organizing help of all sorts such as bringing messages to family members from their loved ones in jail, arranging to send their children to school, caring for the sick and the disabled, and providing food and ration such as rice and wheat which she often carried herself as head loads⁸⁷.

She made the sorrow of the poor and the persecuted her own, consoling bereaved families and shedding tears with them. When news came to her of the painful death of a prisoner inside the prison, she spent sleepless nights and suffered. "Never in my whole life had I experienced such personal grief", she revealed. Her hard work, courage, sacrifice, and perseverance filled the villagers with nothing but reverential love and admiration for her.

⁸⁴ Shantilal Trivedi, *Mere Jail Jeevan Ki Yaadein*, cit., p. 24; 52.

⁸⁵ Shantilal Trivedi, *Mere Jail Jeevan Ki Yaadein*, cit., p. 57.

⁸⁶ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 135.

⁸⁷ Sadan Mishra, interview by author, Garur, April 17, 2011; Shri Himmat Singh Bhakuni, *Behnji ki Smriti Me*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 113.

One such villager, Narayandatt Mungai's father was a freedom fighter imprisoned by the British. Mungai's family suffered the wrath of the British government who had all their belongings auctioned off seven times. Narayandutt lost his mother at this juncture and was left to fend for his three younger brothers and sisters. The young boy of eighteen was at a loss how he would feed his brothers and himself as well as pay for the fees and books in school. Sarala Behn came to his aid with these reassuring words: "Narayan, you do not panic, do not be frustrated and sad, take these eighty rupees and nurture yourself and your family. Have faith, your father will surely come back from jail".

Her words calmed the distraught boy who later recalled with gratitude, "[t]hose eighty rupees were not only enough for us, but it was enough to meet all the expenses of the family and for paying school fees for one whole year. As a result, in May 1945, I was able to graduate Hindi middle school and could pull through this difficult time"⁸⁸. Families benefited in this way by Sarala Behn's motherly affection and benevolent work soon became self-sufficient and returned to a normal life in their community. Bhagirathi Devi, wife of a political prisoner, whose land and property was confiscated revealed to her how she was able to overcome the indignity of a life lived off alms:

Behn*ji*⁸⁹, when you gave me that grain, for fifteen days I ate to fill my belly. For months I had been eating only two *rotis*⁹⁰ a day, and I had no strength left at all in my body. When I recovered my strength then I began to work in others' fields. Since then I haven't missed a single day's labor, and my children haven't gone hungry any day⁹¹.

The British government was aghast and infuriated by the political and social activities of this dauntless white woman in sari, which aptly earned her the title of the "most dangerous person in the district"⁹². Unable to contain her activities and due to her repeated and open flouting of imperial orders Sarala Behn was finally arrested a second time leading to a year's rigorous imprisonment. When an Indian judge confronted her stating that as a British she ought to be ashamed of her anti-British stance, her prompt response was that it was he, not her, who as an Indian ought to be ashamed for helping the British against India⁹³.

⁸⁸ Narayandatt Mungai, *Anathon Ki Sahayika*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 183.

⁸⁹ 'Ji' is gender-neutral honorific, used as suffix after first or last names and as a show of respect for persons.

⁹⁰ Indian flattened bread.

⁹¹ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 166.

⁹² Ivi, p. 143.

⁹³ Vimla Bahuguna, Interview with author, Dehradun, March 17, 2011.



Figure 5. Lakshmi Ashram of Kausani, the historic building where Sarala Behn was under house arrest in August 1942⁹⁴.

Even when in prison, Sarala Behn continued without relent with her plans to bring relief to the distressed. She made arrangements for someone to carry out her work in Almora and to bring her news. Saving up money from her own food allowances she sent monthly money orders to the family of those imprisoned⁹⁵. For psychological and moral support of her prisoner ‘brothers’ she sent them hand-woven and dyed *rakhis*⁹⁶ she made herself and even tied one on the wrist of the prison guard, who on receiving it was “quite overcome with emotion”⁹⁷. Inside prison, noticing the callous disregard for medical attention and care, she “continually” “fought and argued” with the prison doctors and compelled them attend to the needs of those who were ill⁹⁸.

When the Interim government was formed in 1946⁹⁹, Sarala Behn lost no time and met the then Chief Minister of the United Provinces, Govind Ballabh Pant, to ask for the restitution of the harm done to the people by returning the auctioned and mortgaged lands of the political prisoners as well as the improperly appropriated

⁹⁴ David Hopkins, *Lakshmi Ashram, the original and historic building where Sarala Behn was placed under house arrest in August 1942* [ca. 1972-73], David Hopkins Private Collection.

⁹⁵ Shrimati Bhagirathi Devi, *Sarala Behn Ji Ki Kripa*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 179.

⁹⁶ *Rakhi* is a bracelet (a talisman) usually made of cotton and which a sister (or any woman) ties around the wrist of her brother (or someone whom one considers a brother) to express her love and regard for him. The tying of *rakhi* marks the *Raksha Bandhan* festival (Hindu religious festival) held on the full moon of the month of August.

⁹⁷ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 149.

⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 167; 146.

⁹⁹ Towards the end of the British imperial rule, the elections of 1946 led to the formation of the Interim Government led by the Indian National Congress in the Provinces.

finer. Pant sent her to the Home Minister, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, who expressed the government's willingness to proceed on this task but lacks data to work with. "Everyone is adamant in saying that this task must be undertaken, yet nobody wants to take the trouble to present figures", he complained¹⁰⁰. Assuring Kidwai that she would do the needful, Sarala Behn, toured the villages of Kumaon region with the intelligence agents still at her heels. It was an onerous task but she managed to gather all necessary statistics on time to take it to the government headquarters at Lucknow. By 1950 all fined money was returned to the families and auctioned land restored to their lawful owners.

Lakshmi Ashram

Since her arrival in the Kumaon hills, Sarala Behn spent about five years traveling extensively in the villages of the three districts of Nainital, Almora, and Pithoragarh to study the conditions of the village women. She first got acquainted with the lives of the Bhotiya women of the north and then while working for political relief, she came to appreciate the nature of the hill women better. She observed that even in the midst of despair and harassment, these women strived to fend for their families while bravely facing oppression of the foreign rulers with a pride that their husbands were imprisoned for the noble cause of the nation¹⁰¹. Astonished at their indomitable spirit and courage, devotion to and sacrifice for their families, Sarala Behn mused, "What a fund of strength is hidden here, if only it could be used for constructive social purposes!"¹⁰². During her yearlong sentence in 1945, Sarala Behn also came in close contact with the women prisoners from the hills many of whom were destitute widows abandoned by their husbands and victims of various kinds of invidious gendered practices and social oppression. She noticed that women who were accused of criminal acts were either falsely charged or were victims of circumstances and thus could not be held wholly morally culpable for their acts. Once released, these women, she realized, could not be absorbed back into society, would be treated as outcasts or rejected by their family, and further exploited. Concerns about how such women could find their place in society absorbed her. Society does nothing for the rehabilitation of such women. She found a gaping hole in the conventional approach towards criminal justice: "[t]here is no question of 'after-care', neither any chance of getting any kind of employment of labour"¹⁰³.

As a result of these varied experiences on the condition of the hill women, both in the prison and outside, Sarala Behn recognized that an experiment in basic education for girls was an imperative for the hills. There they led miserable lives, with little or no formal education, were married off early and often without consent, and were responsible for almost all household and farming work. The need of the hour, she realized, was a revolution in values in education, as suggested in Gandhi's

¹⁰⁰ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 180.

¹⁰¹ Sarala Devi, "The Growth of People's Movement: From Girls' Education to Conservation – a Non Violent Strategy", February 27, 1979, David Hopkins Private Collection.

¹⁰² Sarala Behan (Behn), *Our Moral Responsibility Towards Women*, in "Bhoodan 6", 20, 1961, p. 153.

¹⁰³ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 147.

alternative to the colonial system of education, or Nai Talim, which encouraged learning through practical work. In addition to receiving academic training the students of Nai Talim learned to be self-sufficient in meeting their basic needs. Along with such basic educational reform Sarala Behn realized the need for reform of women's role in society, "to build up stamina and morale amongst the women-folk and bring them to realize their status they are entitled to and should assume in society"¹⁰⁴.

She became convinced that national reconstruction through the spread of basic education, in particular the education of girls and women, could pave the path to transformative social change. She decided to launch her new project in Kausani. Soon after her release from prison, she went to see Gandhi at Pune to seek his advice and blessing. Lacking knowledge of the hills, Gandhi could not advise her on her project but remarked: "I do have enough faith in your practical wisdom that whatever you want to undertake will indeed be fine", adding that it would not be good to fail in any such endeavor¹⁰⁵.

As a worker with firm focus on devoted service rather than personal satisfaction in producing desired results, she promised Gandhi that she would dedicate twenty years to this task of educating girls with the long-term mission of instilling in them "new values of life in the face of a hostile world"¹⁰⁶. From Pune, Sarala Behn went to Ahmedabad where she studied the conditions of *Vikas Griha* (House of Progress), an educational and rehabilitation center started by the Gandhian, Mridula Sarabhai, for "child widows, battered wives, and elderly women"¹⁰⁷. Sarala Behn noticed, women who received education and vocational training there came out self-respecting and fully self-sufficient and achieved success in whatever profession they pursued. She found Sarabhai's experiment inspiring. She felt confident to start her own and went on a second and extensive fund raising tour with Trivedi. She had in her mind an education center that would set an example for the whole nation. Thus, she considered collecting donations for her proposed education center from the poor and rich alike, from the local Kumaoni people, members of parliament, central and state government ministers, business and social service organizations etc¹⁰⁸. Their democratic efforts yielded a substantial amount of Rs.70, 000 and work on the center thus began with the help of full public approval and cooperation¹⁰⁹.

However, the positive atmosphere of hope waned rapidly after the gaining of political independence. Sarala Behn was dismayed to see that most Congress leaders moved "further and further away from Gandhi's path" and that the movement based on the twin ideals of truth and nonviolence which earned the nation its political independence "had come to an end, to be replaced instead by the coming age of

¹⁰⁴ Sarala Devi, "The Women of the U.P. Hills", July 18, 1974, Shobha Vidyarthi Private Collection.

¹⁰⁵ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 173.

¹⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 174.

¹⁰⁷ Aparna Basu, *Mridula Sarabhai*, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* ed. Bonnie G. Smith, Vol.1, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 637.

¹⁰⁸ Sri Shantilal Trivedi, *Anupam Vyaktitva*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 170.

¹⁰⁹ Shantilal Trivedi, *Mere Jail Jivan Ki Yaadein*, cit., pp. 80-83.

compromise”¹¹⁰. Given the sincerity with which she accepted Gandhi’s vision of a free India, these new developments made her cringe. When the nation began celebrating its first anniversary of independence with pomp and grandeur, Sarala Behn, who would observe a ritual fast on such a day, expressed her thoughts thus:

*Bapu’s*¹¹¹ dream will not be made from hoisting national flags, leading morning processions, and delivering long speeches. We have to make strong resolutions in our minds on this day to bring this freedom to the hundreds and thousands of slums of India. Now we have only got political independence. For the liberation from intellectual and economic slavery that has taken its deep roots in society, we and many others have to spend our entire lives. The task to change the values of society is more difficult than the fight for independence, because the rebellion then was against the British, now it has to do with our own homes, our own society, and with our own mindsets¹¹².

Inspired by the pragmatic spirit of Gandhi’s educational philosophy on one hand, and determined to supplement the deficiencies of government education system on the other, Sarala Behn set before her the task of developing a decentralized, basic education program in the hill villages of Uttarakhand. True to her word to Gandhi, she carried out her promised service of social transformation with missionary zeal through basic education for girls for the next twenty years. Beginning in 1946 her institution, Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal (Kasturba Association for Women’s Uplift) after the memory of Gandhi’s wife Kasturba, popularly called Lakshmi Ashram, became the first one in the region to educate rural women and girls. Her years of selfless service to the families of the freedom fighters bore fruit, as they sent their daughters to her school. Though she employed the basic framework of Nai Talim in her educational experiment at Kausani, she was neither in thrall to a system to live by the letter of Gandhi’s thoughts nor to consider Nai Talim as a fixed charter or a matter of orthodoxy.

Instead, Sarala Behn effectively integrated the Gandhian perspective of education and visions of Gram Swaraj with her own that was orientated to address the interests of the neglected women of rural India. Her integrated philosophy of education was tailored to counter the alienations in human personality in a divided society through holistic and harmonious development of the personality, involving education of the head (intellect), the heart (moral and affective dimensions), and the hand (productive action). Such ideas, were part of an ongoing globally significant intercultural discourse and practice on alternative education, found not only in Gandhi, but also in the work of Rabindranath Tagore and prominent educational thinkers of the west, such as Pestalozzi, Goethe, and progressives such as John Dewey and Paul Geheeb, all of whom emphasized the need for harmony or balance between the development of the body and the soul. Education at Lakshmi Ashram thus meant *sarvangin sikhsha* (all-round education) which combined intellectual work with the practical such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and health. The philosophy of the Scottish educationist, Alexander Sutherland Neill and his famed Summerhill School in

¹¹⁰ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 175.

¹¹¹ Bapu means father both in Hindi and Gujarati. Gandhi in India was reverentially called ‘Bapu,’ and is honored with the title as the father of the nation.

¹¹² Vimla Bahuguna, *Manav Shilpi Behniji*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 75

Suffolk also deeply inspired Sarala Behn. Like Neill, she believed that the educationist should emanate love as the parent of the child and placed a special emphasis on making the children not fear authority¹¹³. Lakshmi Ashram thus emerged as a democratic, self-governing community based on love and responsibility and an awareness of the equal status of all members, young or old, teacher or student, where students learned not how to conform to authority but rather to question it. Such was the impact of Sarala Behn's transformative education that caste discrimination became a thing of the past as the children at the ashram became unaware that they belonged to any caste but Indian¹¹⁴.

The principles of basic education she employed were geared to build the hill women's self-confidence or *atmavishwas* as well as self-reliance or *svabalamban*, to strengthen the weakest links in the nation's chain, the lives of the women, by addressing their drudgery, poor health and nutrition, poverty, and inequality. The primary objective was to integrate women into the project of Gandhi's Gram Swaraj, and through that address the question of gender inequality and social welfare. Girls taught at Lakshmi Ashram were thus trained to become community activists, work for social uplift, and establish Sarvodaya through Gram Swaraj. It created a model of womanhood that enabled the girl students to develop their capacity of independent thinking and judgment as well as a sense of responsibility for the community as a whole. It encouraged women whether married or not to assume socially responsible roles of decision-makers, reformers, and activists outside their traditional domestic spheres and responsibilities. With the education and training they received, several ashram graduates were able to step out of the limited traditional roles of their gender, caste, and class and became frontline leaders in social movements and village reform. They played a pioneering role in women's empowerment, self-reliance of villages through appropriate technology, and the movements against alcoholism and environmental conservation such as the internationally famed forest protection movement called the Chipko (Embrace the Tree) in Uttarakhand¹¹⁵.

In more recent decades, ashram graduates participated in the Uttarakhand movement for a separate hill state and expanded their activities for the protection of the hill environment. The institution stands today as an inspiring project of self and community transformation. It helped create a new concept of womanhood in the hills as self-confident and empowered agents of reform, not merely "objects of reform"¹¹⁶.

It is important to note that while Gandhi sought to change women's psychological mindsets of subservience to patriarchy motivating them to assert their moral agency and realize their freedom, he could not challenge patriarchy per se.

¹¹³ Shrimati Bhavani Kunjwal, *Sanskar Ki Pratikriya*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 120; Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 35; 60.

¹¹⁴ William McKay (Bill) Aitken, *Sarala Behn: A Study in Self-Respect*, in *Sarala Behn: smriti grantha*, cit., p. 204.

¹¹⁵ The birth of environmental movements such as the Chipko in the Uttarakhand Himalaya ought to be analyzed in the background of the theoretical and practical enterprise of both Mira Behn and Sarala Behn. I have argued this point extensively in my doctoral dissertation.

¹¹⁶ Rebecca Klenk, *Gandhi's Other Daughter: Sarala Devi and Lakshmi Ashram*, in "Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies", 34, 1, 2014, p. 102.

One major shortcoming of Gandhi in this direction is that he did not see early the necessity of vocational equality of women in public life¹¹⁷.

Sarala Behn appropriated Gandhi's feminine moral thinking but constructed a creative political style of women's empowerment that not only challenged patriarchy but also took Gandhian ideas to radical directions. She combined the Gandhian notion of Indian womanhood, which extols motherly virtues of self-sacrifice and traditional traits as nurturers or caregivers with the progressive values and social ideals of equality, freedom, and strong sense of independence that characterizes western social activist women.

This combination created a model of womanhood for India that made women more indisputably visible in the public sphere than they were during Gandhi's times. Thus, while Sarala Behn drew from Gandhi's emphasis on the role of women in reconstructing society through direct public participation, her approach was a significant advance over Gandhi's own version of the role of women in Gram Swaraj.

Post-Gandhi social reconstruction movements

During the sixties, when Indo-China hostilities erupted the Gandhian Shanti Sena (Peace Corps)¹¹⁸ as a non-violent alternative to the army began to address the problems of boundary dispute between India and China. The Gandhians were at this stage split into two divergent camps. On one hand Jay Prakash (JP) Narayan advocated an "immediatist approach" of unarmed peacekeeping force composed of civilians who pledged to confront an armed force nonviolently appealing to both sides to quit fighting; and on the other, Vinoba Bhave stressed his "gradualist approach" of "peacebuilding through spiritual awakening" such as addressing the causes of war¹¹⁹. The rift between the two led to a compromised form of nonviolent action organized by the World Peace Brigade, called the *Vishwa-Maitri Yatra* or World Friendship March towards China (Delhi to Beijing). Sarala Behn, along with other Gandhians participated in this peacemaking mission to heal relations between the two nations and promote transnational cooperation and dialog. The Friendship March was critical of both Indian and Chinese arms and policy and as such refused to sanction either India's war effort or unequivocally condemn China. In a situation where anti-China feelings had reached a fevered point, Sarala Behn spoke at a

¹¹⁷ Gandhi significantly revised his position on women's empowerment and patriarchy only in his later years when he vigorously advocated vocational equality of women. Howard cites how at the time of India's Independence, Gandhi had made a remarkably progressive turn from his earlier views stating if he had his way, "the President of the Indian Republic will be a chaste and brave Bhangi [untouchable] girl". Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Speech at Prayer meeting*, in CWMG, v. 95, 1999, p. 347, accessed June 14, 2012, <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL095.PDF>. Veena R. Howard, *Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy: Ascetic Power and Women's Empowerment*, in "Journal of the American Academy of Religion", 81, 1, 2013, p. 157.

¹¹⁸ The Shanti Sena was formed in 1958 inspired by Gandhi and advanced by his followers. It was originally conceived as a local action group with trained activists.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Weber, *Gandhi's Peace Army: The Shanti Sena and Unarmed Peacekeeping*, Syracuse University Press, New York 1996, p. xx; 142-43.

meeting to discuss the Friendship March in which she clarified how animosity between the nations is not merely the fault of China alone, suggesting a more balanced approach and amicable resolution between the two nations¹²⁰. Her position on the war was immediately interpreted by Indian intelligence agents as a British citizen blaming India for the fighting with China and she was denied permission to travel inside the Inner Line or the Indian side of the border with Tibet¹²¹.

In November 1966, she was invited to attend an important meeting organized by the Sarvodaya activists on the question of consolidating constructive work to boost self-sufficiency and nonviolent defense potential of the vulnerable Himalayan border areas. To add insult to injury, a request by her colleagues to obtain an entry permit for her in that area was declined because she was now seen as a 'foreigner.' The incident was looked upon by Sarala Behn, who accepted India as her 'home' and dedicated her whole life fighting for justice for the Indian people, as a fundamental breach of human trust and distressed her to such an extent that she decided to leave the hills.

For the next few years, Sarala Behn traveled to Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka. She played a remarkable role in post-Gandhi social reconstruction movements such as Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan-Gramdan movement (voluntary gift of land to the landless and village gift for equitable land distribution) and especially in the rehabilitation of the bandits of the Chambal Valley Peace Mission in Madhya Pradesh. The Chambal valley and its uninhabitable ravine land were at that time home to some notorious bandits for centuries and government was not been able to redress the issue through the usual statist methods of force and violence. When Bhave and Narayan began working towards the surrender and rehabilitation of these bandits, Sarala Behn joined their mission and went to the rebels' families to persuade them to surrender.

She kept regular personal contacts with the bandits who surrendered to the government and who were put in jail taking care of their needs, eating lunch with them, writing letters to their families, doing moral counseling and guiding them to live a more constructive life¹²². Focused on reparation and rehabilitation, her approach was restorative, aimed at healing people, communities, and relationships. As Lakshmi Ashram graduate, Shobha Behn (Vidyarthi) who joined Sarala Behn in this mission put it, "Sarala Behn approached the bandits and their families like a mother, speaking to them with love and creating a homely atmosphere, even when she met them in the jail.

¹²⁰ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., pp. 262-263.

¹²¹ The 'Inner Line', a British invention, is an internal frontier drawn through the mountains of Garhwal and Kumaon, and lies south of the international border between India and Tibet/China. Indians living south of this line required special permit to cross it while foreigners were not allowed to cross this line at all. *The Inner Line*, "Himalayan Journal", 17, 1952, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.himalayanclub.org/journal/the-inner-line%e2%80%99/>

¹²² Sarala Behn, "Personal Diary," January to May 1972, Shobha Vidyarthi Private Collection; Ramchandra Mehrotra, "Astha ka naam Sarala Behn," [Sarala Behn, faith is her name] in *Sarala Behn: smriti grantha*, cit., pp. 194-195; Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 365; 367-369.

She was always interested to know what circumstances turned those people into bandits, and worked to reform and bring them back to society¹²³. Rebels, Sarala Behn observed, were born either out of economic inequalities or when they were incriminated falsely. Therefore, to address the problem at its roots, she reasoned, “the first step is to awaken feelings of humanity in society and with that to overcome the gulf between rich and poor”¹²⁴. On one occasion, when an assistant criticized her for showing concern for mere bandits who he believed were by nature beyond any cure, Sarala Behn retorted:

What did you say, Gopal Bhai? Is not the bandit a person? What are you and me then? ... It is he who doesn't earn his own livelihood or work hard a real bandit, you should understand this. If they are rebels, then we are responsible and accountable for them, they are not ... I have to take care of their people, they deserve sympathy and compassion...

In this way, Sarala Behn advocated a shift in our cultural attitude of solely blaming criminals for their actions toward understanding the root causes of crime such as the underlying structural and cultural biases in our political, social, and economic systems. Her patient reform work amongst the bandits and their families played a significant role in converting several of them into good, peaceful citizens¹²⁵. Her inspiration and those of several others were pivotal to the surrender of infamous bandits such as Mohar Singh, Madho Singh, and one hundred and eighty others during 1971-72¹²⁶.

This work of Sarala Behn affirms the view that novel social experiments could be successful through nonviolent means, provided “the government and the public, working together as one made the necessary efforts”¹²⁷.

Conclusion

A love for independence and a fiery zeal to fight patriarchy and imperialism characterized Sarala Behn's early life. She lived as a citizen of the world challenging provincialism in every aspect of life that obscures one's view of the essential oneness of nature and humanity. She did not only question British imperialism, but also that of the nation-state, government, education, and religion if these became systems of oppression and corruption. She challenged conventional roles of women in society. Though she did not take a vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) as many women of Gandhi's ashram, she did not accept marriage although she did not oppose marriage for her activist students whom she mentored. In fact, she helped liberate the concept of marriage from narrow immures of the private family to forge new 'familial' relationships with the larger nation and the world.

¹²³ Shobha Behn (Shobha Vidyarthi), interview by author, Dharamghar, April 14, 2011.

¹²⁴ Sarala Devi, “Ahinsak Padhyati Ki Khoj: Chambal Ke Baagi Khetra Me Ek Naya Prayog”, April 11, 1967, Shobha Vidyarthi Private Collection.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁶ Prabha Pant, *Karmayogi Sarala Behn*, cit., p. 47.

¹²⁷ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 369.



Figure 6. Sarala Behn on the occasion of the marriage of Shashi Prabha Rawat, a student of Lakshmi Ashram and Gandhian activist Man Singh Rawat, 1953. The Rawats dedicated next six decades of their life to the uplift of the Boksia tribal people of Uttarakhand¹²⁸.

Colonial India had many European women, majority of whom came to live in India with their husbands and were addressed by the natives as *memshahibs* (married white upper-class women), and those who came from their home country to do missionary work. Most of these women believed in and identified with the empire and maintained a civilizational superiority over the colonized. There were Victorian feminists too, who considered improving the lot of the Indian woman was part of the “white women’s burden”, an idea that served as justification for the civilizing mission of the imperial government¹²⁹. These “imperial feminists”¹³⁰, as Valerie Amos and Pratibha Palmer illustrates, maintained their colonial identity and that too with respect to a racialized construct of the colonized other.

However, emergent scholars in this field such as Sharon Macdonald points out that there were many who did not fit in this reformist and/or feminist group and even left their missions (social or religious) to become supporters of the Indian cause for

¹²⁸ David Hopkins, *Sarala Behn on the occasion of the marriage of Shashi Prabha Rawat and Man Singhji Rawat, this marriage was held at the ashram only*. [ca. 1972-73], David Hopkins Private Collection.

¹²⁹ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1994, p. 10.

¹³⁰ Valerie Amos and Prathibha Palmer, *Challenging Imperial Feminism*, in “Feminist Review”, 80, 2005, pp. 44-63.

liberation¹³¹. Many of these women found in Gandhi and his nonviolence, a spiritual power to challenge the colonizing and missionizing activities of Britain and a vision of a society free from race, class, caste, gender, and religious prejudice.

As a British woman in colonial India, Sarala Behn's interest in serving the Indian women's cause might seem similar to those of the colonial British feminists, such as her opposition to practices of child marriage, the treatment of widows, and purdah and advocating the education and empowerment of women, health and hygiene etc. However, these were issues which the Gandhian constructive and nationalist movement also addressed and cannot be seen as unique to the British feminist movement in India. Moreover, as Antoinette Burton argues, even British feminism was not a monolithic construct and could not be the only story of the time of feminist theory and practice¹³².

Sarala Behn's feminist leanings, as Klenk points out, were different than those of the liberal middle class bourgeois feminists or those keen to bring modernity to the colonized¹³³. She differed significantly from her feminist counterparts in that her position adopted the Gandhian critique of western modernity and was anti-colonial, anti-racist, exhibited non-conformist background, critiqued Christian patriarchy but was spiritually motivated, and believed in nonviolence.

In the process of encountering with and immersing in the native culture of her adopted land Sarala Behn well-nigh erased her own English identity and defied commonly held European codes of behavior specified for *memshahibs* and conforming upper class Indian elites that urged maintaining distance with the natives and the poor. In this way, she also challenged conventional constructs of colonial feminism and Indian elitism that seemed to ally with patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism.

While it may still be argued that as the "Other" in the eye of the Indian women, Sarala Behn may not be equated on same terms, she nevertheless had a unique ability to assimilate herself in the local culture with a directness and simplicity that was unlike her British peers.

As revealed by her close acquaintances: "We were hesitant at first when we saw this English woman amidst us, but as we started getting close to her, all our doubts went away naturally... We noticed that while discussing matters with us not a single English word came out of her mouth"¹³⁴. She refused to entertain English-speaking urban elites who often came to meet her and greeted them with her familiar comeback in Hindi: "Why, don't you know Hindi?" pronouncing further: "I am now wholly devoted to India and have therefore forgotten English"¹³⁵. For social service it was important for Sarala Behn to gain trust and acceptance of the society and culture in which one works so her dress, dialect, food habits, and lifestyle always

¹³¹ Sharon McDonald, *Neither Memsahibs nor Missionaries: Western Women Who Supported the Indian Independence Movement*, PhD diss., University of New Brunswick, 2010.

¹³² Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists* cit., p. 9.

¹³³ Rebecca Klenk, *Gandhi's Other Daughter*, cit., p. 101.

¹³⁴ Shri Bhuvanchandra Tiwari, *Shraddha-Suman*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 119.

¹³⁵ Dada Dharmadhikari, *Do Mahimamayi Mahilayein: Sarala Behn, Mira Behn*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 155.

used to be in harmony with her Indian surroundings. In this way, she developed a large family of friends and acquaintances wherever she went and people often became unaware that she was a foreigner¹³⁶.

Sarala Behn's feminism was thus a product of her inborn urge to oppose wrong values and her passion for justice that emerged in course of her experiences during the War and the discrimination she suffered in her own society in England. The nature of her personal background immediately makes her feminism reject the regnant theoretical constructs of the west, not only of imperialism but also the *status quo* as in conventional outlook based on gender, race, class, nation, religion and every other institutionalized form of oppression and injustice that it perpetrates.

Spiritually, Sarala Behn was not inclined towards organized religion. She harbored a certain dislike not only for priests, but also monks and sadhus and their like, and did not accept superstitions, traditional rituals, or images of any sort. Yet, she came to regard on equal terms the religious traditions of village India without identifying herself with any of them. In her educational experiments she adopted Gandhi's inter-religious teachings which reached a new dimension under her socio-anthropological lens.

Her ashram exhibited a cosmopolitan atmosphere which included people from various religious traditions and cultural communities, both foreign and native, working together to create a new meaning of life. While organized religion did not appeal to her, the moral aspect of religion did. Her humanitarian work amongst the masses strongly suggest that she manifested in her life and works the Christian teaching of serving God by serving others perhaps more fully than many missionaries of her time. Thus, she saw spirituality in the common context of human self-knowing in relation to each other and the cosmos. Faith was thus not bound to theoretical abstractions or theological exegesis but its central teachings were oriented to address "current personal, national, and international questions". This she called "practical spirituality"¹³⁷.

Sarala Behn spent the last few active years of her life at Himdarshan Kutir (Snow-view cottage) overlooking the eternal snows of the Himalaya at Dharamghar, set amidst thick, dense forests of Oak. From here she worked on Vyapak Lok Shikshan (Comprehensive Public Education) a mass education program on environmental awareness and women's empowerment¹³⁸. She was not only an educator but also a writer and an inspiring public speaker. She spread her word through the press in which she wrote on social and ecological issues, through letters to Sarvodaya activists and ashram girls, and through organizing people's movement in the hills to sustain the Himalayan environment. From Himdarshan Kutir she wrote books on the environment such as *Sanrakshan Ya Vinash* (Conservation or Destruction) and *Revive Our Dying Planet*.

¹³⁶ Sarala Behn, *A Life in Two Worlds*, cit., p. 78.

¹³⁷ Sarala Devi, *Sarvodaya – A Possible Synthesis Between the Quaker Witness and Communism*, Shobha Vidyarthi Private Collection.

¹³⁸ Sadan Mishra, "Pujya Sarala Behn ji ke punyatithi 8th July 2012 ko shraddhanjali ke do shabd" (A tribute to Sarala Behn on her death anniversary, 8th of July) (speech, Lakshmi Ashram Kausani, Almora, July 8, 2012).

For her lifelong contribution to Sarvodaya work, she was honored with the prestigious award from Jannalal Bajaj Foundation (Mumbai) in 1979. She utilized the award money in publishing her work and in establishing Parvatiya Paryavaran Samrakshan Samiti (PPSS) or Mountain Environment Protection Committee at Dharamghar in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, a center that would cater to the protection of Himalayan environment¹³⁹. As one who lived Gandhi's philosophy of non-possession to the letter, Sarala Behn donated all her personal belongings to the self-sufficiency of this organization, an indication of the importance she gave to the cause of the environment¹⁴⁰. Additionally, she left her own share from her father's will for the service of women and their empowerment in Uttarakhand, in the name of *Iswar Premi Fund* (Fund for those who love God)¹⁴¹.

Sarala Behn passed away on July 8, 1982 at Almora. Her legacy lies in her educational program that translated Gandhi's ideas into an evolved, transformative living practice of empowering women by instilling in them self-confidence, making them self-reliant with purpose and agency in shaping society. She served as an inspiring mentor to more than one generation of social activists in Uttarakhand. She believed in a small band of dedicated and active constructive workers who could live simply with the masses and become part of them and who could then act as prime movers of social change.

She did not have faith in expert-driven and centrally-managed organizations which tend to focus more on accomplished individuals than the common people. Thus, even when involved with social work institutions, "she kept her distance from seats of power" to drive home the message amongst her followers that it is people not "superior beings with special privileges" who can and do bring social change¹⁴². As her friend and co-worker, Trivedi remarked that her ideals were to offer selfless service, "without name and fame, without press and platform"¹⁴³. Amongst the social workers she mentored, she strove to preserve diversity. Like a true educator, "[s]he wanted everyone to keep his/her individuality intact, [and] participate in a common programme only when convinced of its ideology and methodology"¹⁴⁴.

If not a daughter or a disciple of Gandhi, Sarala Behn can be correctly acclaimed as the "Mother of Sarvodaya activities in the hills of Uttarakhand," and "a teacher who teaches through action"¹⁴⁵. As a mother, she took loving care of the poor, the sick, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. As a teacher, she created and nurtured a

¹³⁹ Vimla Bahuguna, *Manav Shilpi Behnji*, [Behnji, the crafter of people] in *Sarala Behn: smriti grantha*, cit., p. 76.

¹⁴⁰ Sri Sadan Prasad Mishra, *Sarala Behnji, Jitna Main Samjha*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 105.

¹⁴¹ Shri Devi Puraskar, *Adbhut VyaktitvaBehnji*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 101.

¹⁴² Shri Devendra Kumar, *Sarala Behn – A Tribute To*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., pp. 197-198.

¹⁴³ Shantilal Trivedi, *Kuch Madhur Yaadein*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 174.

¹⁴⁴ Shri Devendra Kumar, *Sarala Behn – a tribute to*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p.198.

¹⁴⁵ Sunderlal Bahuguna, "Address by Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna on the occasion of the release of the book 'Revive Our Dying Planet', by Smt. Sarla Devi at NMNH, New Delhi on 12.1.1982", *Sarala Behn Papers*, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

culture of holistic education that molded lives and one and that was, to borrow her words, “vyavaharik” or practical. Scottish author Bill Aitken, who lived and worked in Sarala Behn’s ashram at Kausani, considered her as “one of those rare souls who understood that life was a privilege to be used. In an age when the state encroach[es] on the right of the individual, her life stands out like a lone banner ranged against the mass columns of convention”¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁶ Bill Aitken, *Sarala Behn: A Study in Self Respect*, in *Sarala Behn Smriti Grantha*, cit., p. 203.