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Gandhi's Other Daughter: Sarala Devi and Lakshmi Ashram

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Gandhi's Other Daughter: Sarala Devi and Lakshmi Ashram

Rebecca Klenk

In 1946, Sarala Devi, formerly Catherine Mary Heileman of London, founded a Gandhian training center and school for women and girls in Kumaon, in what was then the Himalayan region of the United Provinces, India. She and her students challenged conventions regarding gender, sexuality, and appropriate roles for colonial women. This essay analyzes Sarala Devi's translocal work and shifting subjectivity in the context of her transnational position as she negotiated colonial, modernist, feminist, Gandhian, and village discourses in her mission to 'uplift' women. It identifies and analyzes the varied historical contexts, ideologies, and discourses that created the possibility for Sarala Devi's life and work in the Kumaon Himalaya.

Keywords: Himalaya, Uttarakhand, Gandhism, feminism, gender.

Darkness was driven away, a new day came... Independence. Right now, all of our hands are in the sunrise of this new age. How shall we make the sunrise? From shining sun or shadows of clouds? Particularly in our mountains, our village women and children are entrapped in the night of ignorance's gloom. Our Kasturba Mahilā Utthān Mandal [Lakshmi Ashram] is founded in Kumaon with this hope: that through the spreading of our girls, rays of knowledge shall spread among the women of the hills. Seeing their hard work, labor, play, and happiness, a hope is born that when these girls grow up they shall spread this light throughout all hill villages. We will found a new age.

— Sarala Devi, *Sūryoday*, 1948¹

Sarala Devi, Née Catherine Mary Heilemann

In 1946, Sarala Devi, born Catherine Mary Heilemann in London, founded a training center for women and girls in Kumaon, soon to be known as Lakshmi Ashram, in what was then the Himalayan region of the United Provinces, now the Indian state of Uttarakhand. Remembered for her dedication to the anticolonial movement, Gandhian ideals, and her work with women and girls, Sarala Devi was also a noted environmentalist. This essay analyzes her translocal work and restless, shifting subjectivity in the context of her transnational position as she negotiated colonial, modernist, feminist, and Gandhian discourses on nation and

womanhood in her mission to ‘uplift’ Himalayan women.² I argue that Sarala Devi’s gendered class position, combined with the ascendance of the Nehruvian modernization project, diminished the historical visibility of her unusual place-based—and fundamentally agrarian—conceptualization of Himalayan women’s empowerment. Her distinctive vision complicates dominant understandings of colonial feminists; I hope that this short piece will spark interest among feminist historians in pursuing further the implications of Sarala Devi’s ideas and work.³

Braving the chill sea air of Liverpool’s port on 4 January 1932, as a willful young woman of 31, Catherine boarded an India-bound steamer alone. As Sarala Devi, she remained in India until her death in 1982, dedicating her life to Gandhi’s ideal of *swarājya* (*swaraj*; self-reliance) and independence from colonial rule. She neither married nor became a mother. Sarala Devi benefited from Gandhi’s endorsement of women’s participation in the nationalist movement, as did some urban, upper caste and class Indian women. Yet, she occupied marginalized positions in metropole and colony. Inelegant social positioning also set her apart from Mira Behn (née Madeline Slade), Gandhi’s better known British ‘daughter.’ So marked was the contrast between the two that some described Mira Behn as ‘the Brahmin’ and Sarala Devi as ‘the Baniya,’ making ironic use of the caste hierarchy to grant Mira Behn a higher status than Sarala Devi.⁴ Both women blossomed into committed anticolonial activists, and both worked in the Uttarakhand Himalaya, though Sarala Devi never held the limelight as did her glamorous peer.

Sarala Devi’s life challenged social conventions regarding class, gender, sexuality and appropriate roles for women, as would the lives of the Himalayan girls she would mentor. Even so, she occupied—however uneasily—a social space established by the colonial order of which she was a critic, and aspects of her orientation to working in India resonated with key preconceptions common to colonial feminists. In this vein, Indians were construed as a special burden placed squarely upon the shoulders of the ‘civilized,’ a notion Sarala Devi accepted, along with the idea that the responsibility of the civilized to improve the world could best be met through working with the colonized poor (instead of, say, remaining at ‘home’ to work with east London’s poor, as did Gandhi’s ally Muriel Lester). Sarala Devi structured her efforts to improve the India she encountered around social reforms advocated by colonial British feminists, whose concerns included child marriage, widowhood, caste discrimination, hygiene, the education of women and girls, and *purdah* (practices of secluding females).⁵

Yet, her creative self-positioning ultimately forged new possibilities for engagement between colonial and colonized women. In her critiques of imperialism and colonial patriarchy, she opposed some of the civilizing mission’s foundational truisms by drawing upon Gandhian ideals, along with the politics of her marginalized position. The alternative politics of engagement with Himalayan women that she theorized were partially based in an implicit reconceptualization of agriculturalists as a transnational class defined by a deep intimacy with nature. To consider Sarala Devi’s work in light of her transnational position, I examine stories told in her Hindi-language memoir, and continue with an analysis that places the Gandhian institution that Sarala Devi founded in the Uttarakhand Himalaya just prior to Indian independence in the context of that era.⁶

“Call of the East”

According to some of Sarala Devi’s Gandhian colleagues, her anticolonial zeal was inspired by childhood experiences in Britain where, as the daughter of a father with a German surname and an English mother, she was painfully stigmatized.⁷ London was an especially tough place for British subjects of German parentage during her teenage years, which overlapped with World War I and its aftermath. Her father was wrongfully jailed as an enemy during the war because of his heritage. Catherine did not attempt to atone for her detained father and German surname through displays of nationalism, and was excluded from school activities. In 1915, the headmistress told her, “Listen Catherine, it has been decided that as your family is 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 have a much better chance of winning than those girls who are active in the war effort” (Behn 2010: 5).⁸ Sarala Devi recalled, “Hearing this I was dumbfounded, not because I was going to be denied a scholarship, but rather because of the reasons given. I began to wonder 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 feel no pain whatsoever in causing suffering to their own children’s minds” (ibid). At sixteen she had to give up her studies and go to work in an office where her employer also considered her to be an enemy. She explained, “The picture of the future that I had kept before me had been crushed, and my personal despair slowly began to assume the form of revolt against society” (ibid). Strolls through the countryside offered some respite, and kindled a lifelong passion for nature. “Through coming into close contact with Mother Nature, I began to loathe the noise

and pace of city life,” she mused, “...I began to think about leading a life among the fields and forests...” (ibid: 8). Soon after her father’s release, she left his house and “...went through a succession of changing jobs and residences” (ibid: 9).

In a memoir chapter entitled “Call of the East,” Sarala Devi described meeting her first Indian friends in a 1920s London boarding house during this period of her life. “Imperialism and colonialism were presented to me in a new light,” she reflected,

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 own ... I came to know of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, the efforts of the Tagore family, the establishment of Santiniketan, the reform movement of Swami Dayananda, Lokmanya Tilak, and after that, Gandhi’s non-violent movement for independence. (ibid: 12)

Catherine felt a keen sense of empathy for the nationalist struggle, rooted in her experience of injustice at the empire’s center, as well as her religious beliefs. Stunned by the bravery of the Dandi Salt March (ibid: 14),⁹ she became an active supporter of independence. Engaging her Lutheran upbringing as she interpreted a swirl of new ideas, she wove Christ and ambivalence about socialism together in articulating her decision to travel to India,

It felt as if the spirit of Christ had been reawakened in a non-Christian land. It now seemed that the desire I 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, spinning, the removal of untouchability, and promoting health, and hygiene. My closest friends and relatives felt these ideas of mine to be childish and quite foolish. Self-styled socialist friends also warned me, “You will endure a great deal of discomfort simply to learn this simple fact, that the black man is not to be trusted. No matter how much you serve him, in the end he will only stab you in the back!” I remained obstinate and so slowly my friends either began to look upon me simply as an object of pity, or else they gave up on me. (ibid)

Gandhi’s rejection of ‘the machine age’ and emphasis on hand spinning—and the *charkha* (the spinning wheel), used to make *khadi*¹⁰—spoke to her own alienation from urban industrial life. Of Gandhi’s ideas about the *charkha* she marveled, “It was not simply a practical means of revolt against some foreign government, colonialism, or imperialism, rather it was 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 with me. Every statement uttered and every word written by this individual, Gandhi, clad in just a small dhoti, held true meaning” (ibid: 12-13).

Catherine wrote to Gandhi to request permission to join his work. He discouraged her, warning that most Westerners were unable to adapt to India. She was not well-connected or well-educated, and her efforts to secure other positions failed. To qualify herself to be of greater use, she enrolled in a midwifery course. The program introduced her to the ideas of “...pacifist groups such as the Fabians and Quakers who, opposing the present social structure, were thinking about the creation of a new society through some form of revolution” (ibid: 15). Before finishing, she received a letter inviting her to work at a school in Udaipur. She accepted, and transferred to a three-month program in child education.

Although thrilled by the opportunity to work in India, Catherine was not satisfied with her position. The school served middle class children and was not run along Gandhian lines. She wished to teach poor children and participate in Gandhi’s Constructive Program, which she considered to be “the true foundation of the freedom struggle” (ibid: 36). She sought to fashion herself anew in a new place, working for a new struggle. “Our endeavors were not getting to the root of the evil,” she grumbled, “As a result, feelings of despondency and dissatisfaction began to creep into my mind” (ibid: 38). At some unnarrated point during her four years in Udaipur, she ceased being Catherine. She became Sarala Behn in daily life and Sarala Devi in written exchanges. This presents a fascinating lacuna. Her memoir makes it clear that Gandhi did not choose her new name, but offers no further explanation. In her effort to naturalize her renamed, refashioned self, Sarala Devi perhaps contrives to give a seamless account of herself in print, a feat which in practice continued to be cumbersome for a colonial woman negotiating a complex subjectivity in a decolonizing land.

To combat despondency, in 1935 Sarala Devi visited Mahila Ashram in Wardha.¹¹ She had written to Gandhi since her

arrival in India, without response. As luck would have it, Gandhi was in Wardha when she arrived,

Getting up early in the morning, I was walking in the garden when I met Bapu. A small, fit body, a bald head, a small dhoti. He had wrapped a cotton shawl around his body. He met me quite naturally, with great love and affection ... “Well! Are you new here?” “Yes.” “What is your name?” “Some people call me Sarala Behn.” He started to laugh. “Oh! So you are also one of those with two names? How many days can you stay here?” “About ten days.” “Then will I be able to make some use of you?” “Certainly.” (ibid: 41-42)

The visit opened new connections for Sarala Devi, who relocated to Mahila Ashram in 1936. This too proved disappointing. Although Mahila Ashram was run along Gandhian lines, the joyful atmosphere she expected was not present, “The girls spun on the *charkha*, ground flour, and prepared the meals. However, their work was not imbued with a feeling of devotion to labor, only a sense of discipline. They showed no interest in classes either, and there were many restrictions placed on them” (ibid: 52). Her health declined due to malaria and stomach ailments, for which she would only accept “nature cure.” Gandhi encouraged her to visit the Uttarakhand Himalaya to recover in the mountain air, insisting that she was not suited for intense heat. During this trying time, Sarala Devi chanced to overhear a conversation about a Gandhian ashram in Chanauda, a village just south of the mountainside where she would eventually establish Lakshmi Ashram. She was impressed, but maintained, “...it was not my wish to go somewhere else, leaving my [ashram] family, Sevagram, and Bapu ... It felt as if I was renouncing the world to go and live in the forest” (ibid: 81).

Despite reservations, Sarala Devi arrived in Chanauda in August 1941. As her health returned she grew restless, “Following Gandhi’s advice, I would get up in the morning at four o’clock and go walking in the hills covered with pine forest or among the fields of yellow rice, on my return bathing in the river before preparing a simple meal. In the afternoon I would try to spin Tibetan wool ... Besides learning to spin wool, gathering a group of some local women together, I began to teach them knitting with needles” (ibid: 84). For several years she traveled throughout the Kumaon Division of Uttarakhand, learning the local Pahari language, working with villagers, and living in joint family homes. She was guided by *sarvodaya* ideals,¹² and made it a point to share hygiene basics and discuss Gandhi’s ideas about *grām swarājy* (*gram swaraj*; village self-reliance). The

British placed her under house arrest for her involvement in the 1942 Quit India Movement. She was twice imprisoned for violating house arrest orders, first for a few months in Almora, and later for a lengthier period in Lucknow. When she founded Lakshmi Ashram, she turned to influential contacts made in jail to recruit students.

“We Will Found a New Age”

The institution that came to be called Lakshmi Ashram was founded at the climax of the independence movement, in a wider social context animated by debates on national reconstruction and education,¹³ and especially on the education of women and girls.¹⁴ At the same time, heightened ecological and economic transformation in the Uttarakhand Himalaya formed a significant regional context. Commercial timber harvesting by the colonial administration had depleted common forest resources, and village economies had been compromised. This pushed increasing numbers of men to journey out of the hills to search for work in cities on the plains, while women remained in villages to tend families and farms. Through her program at Lakshmi Ashram in this context, Sarala Devi sought to foster a new kind of Himalayan womanhood and contribute to establishing Gandhi’s vision of an alternative modernity rooted in *gram swaraj* (village self-reliance). A local group of Indian nationalists and the Mahatma himself supported her project. The ashram played a key role in the network of *sarvodaya* projects that took shape throughout Uttarakhand. Both the ashram (now something of an icon and managed by women from the area) and this network have continued to be involved in regional alternative development schemes. In the early days, the network was closely articulated with Vinoba Bhave’s ashram-based work after Gandhi’s assassination, and his Bhoodan (Land Gift) movement, which I shall discuss further below.

To honor Gandhi’s wife Kasturba, Sarala Devi founded her institution as *Kasturba Mahilā Uthhān Mandal*. She designed it as a Gandhian Basic Education¹⁵ program where girls would take academic classes and simultaneously learn to become *svāvalambī* (self-reliant) *samāj sevikā* (community activists), who would with *antimvisvās* (self-confidence) work (to) *uthhānā* (to uplift; also *sudhārnā*) their village sisters and establish the Gandhian ideal of *gram swaraj* (village self-reliance) through *sarvodaya* in rural Uttarakhand. A cottage named Lakshmi Ashram, donated by a local Indian Civil Service officer who had named it after his wife, provided a home for the new institution. Over time, the cottage was added to, and in 1952 a two-story building was constructed just downhill. The names “Sarala Ashram” and,

eventually, “Lakshmi Ashram” stuck to the venture, which never became known as *Kasturba Mahilā Utthān Mandal*.

There were no viable routes for rural girls’ education in the Uttarakhand Himalaya beyond primary school when Sarala Devi founded Lakshmi Ashram in 1946. The independence movement was soon to reach its tragic denouement (the end of British rule, marred by the carnage of partition) when the first students arrived. Sarala Devi recruited six girls from the region to begin her program, and enrollments steadily grew. Unlike students who have enrolled since the 1960s, who come from relatively poor families, the early students came from more comfortable backgrounds. Few had spent their days engaged in the farm chores typical of ordinary village girls. Their parents were largely enthusiastic about the ashram’s political objective to “found a new age” in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. Some of the fathers had themselves worked to establish Gandhi’s Constructive Program in the hills as Freedom Fighters. Their determination to educate daughters, and willingness to entrust them to an eccentric English woman were unusual. There was no custom in rural Uttarakhand of sending girls away for schooling; they usually remained close to home until marriage. Sarala Devi kindled new aspirations for the futures of these daughters, but also had to earn their parents’ trust.

Sarala Devi designed her own syllabi and taught the first girls herself. Her curriculum included science, mathematics, Hindi, history and geography. In keeping with the applied learning focus of Gandhian education, she incorporated academics into daily life at the ashram as much as possible. Students were not prepared for government board exams. Sarala Devi followed Gandhi in her conceptualization of *sarvodaya* and *samāj sevā* (manual labor and work for the benefit of wider rural society) as more important than conventional academics for the development of her pupils. They spent most of their time working, in assemblies, or traveling, with but a few hours daily set aside for academics. Sarala Devi made the nationalist choice that only Hindi was to be spoken at the ashram, and all course materials were in Hindi.

The ashram language policy was inspired by Gandhi, who argued that English would enslave the Indian masses (Gandhi 1938: 71). It provided students with a thorough knowledge of their official provincial language, but marginalized the Pahari languages most spoke at home. Meanwhile, English continued to be widely spoken by Indian elites, and to be the inter-provincial language of choice outside of the Hindi belt. Sarala Devi’s students were thus unprepared for work outside of Hindi-speaking north India, or with English-speaking elites. Then again, these

are not the aspirations she hoped to instill. She wished for them to stay at ‘home,’ but *differently*. Even so, many felt disadvantaged by this aspect of the program. During a recorded conversation, a former student expressed frustration with the way that language politics circumscribed the curriculum:

If some girl even spoke “A-B-C-D,” then she didn’t like it. “This is the language of slaves! This is the mentality of slaves!” It seemed like that to her. It seemed to her that in that way we are mimicking the English. So, to us, even now, it seems that this degree of strictness is not okay. ... Just as we have to study all subjects, we have to study Sanskrit, we also have to study Hindi, in that way one subject that also has to be taught is a little bit of English.

Sarala Devi’s program featured other distinctive components, including diarizing, the student literary magazine *Sūryoday*, an array of cultural programs, and the *Kasturba Pustakalāy* (Library), stocked with Gandhian books. These were intended to educate students about Gandhian ideas, but also to foster students’ capacity to reflect upon their social and natural world through writing, art, drama, song and dance. Students fondly remembered celebrations for regional Hindu festivals, and for other major religious and national holidays, along with special programs for guests. These occasions ritually connected students to their communities even as they developed distinctive new practices, and to the wider national community with which Sarala Devi’s program was designed to articulate.

Following Gandhi’s plan for *khadi* production to become a core vehicle for village self-reliance, students learned to spin, weave, and sew *khadi*. The girls were also required to dress in simple, dark *khadi*, and remove their jewelry.¹⁶ Some graduates confided to me that they initially found *khadi* garments unattractive and missed jewelry, but gradually came to respect the ethos of simplicity. Also in keeping with *sarvodaya* ideals, fieldwork in the form of *padyātrā* (foot marches) and *śivir* (village training camps) was, and has continued to be, central to the program. Such fieldwork was geared to emphasize learning directly from villagers, especially women, and it ideally provided interactive settings for ashram students and teachers to share information about hygiene and health, as well as social, ecological, and political issues.

The Gandhi Memorial Fund provided early support, but Sarala Devi and her first students strove to model the Gandhian ideal by making the ashram self-supporting. They formed teams to do all regular chores. Milk and yogurt came from their own cows, and they collected fuel

wood and fodder from the forest. They dined on vegetables, spices, and fruit that flourished in terraced gardens that they established on the ashram grounds, and prepared simple meals over a wood-burning hearth. They did their own housekeeping and ran a *khadi* shop and a homeopathic dispensary in a roadside bazaar. Most of these tasks and projects have continued to be central to contemporary ashram life. Together, these activities provided Sarala Devi's Himalayan students with leadership experience, expertise in the practical application of the Gandhian ideal of self-reliance, and skills in business, craft production, innovative organic farming, cooking, and community organizing. Modest fees purchased school supplies, kerosene, medicines, and tools.

Ashram days were meticulously scheduled; each period was punctuated by a bell, with chimes far resonant across the hillside.¹⁷ Students and teachers arose at 4:30am, before the sun, and went to bed at 9:00pm, after the sky had darkened to a lavish display of stars. The bell-governed schedule was far more evocative of British boarding schools than of Himalayan villages, and elderly graduates vividly recalled the rigorous disciplining of time. In their memories, this suffused the ashram mission with special significance; it seemed to link the school to global rhythms of modernity, in which time was 'used' rather than 'wasted.' Indeed, as Lisa Trivedi has argued, the mastery of time itself was central to the Gandhian anticolonial agenda (2007: 103). Like the British colonial government, Gandhi sought to reform the use of time in order to make Indian society more productive, but his intention was not to conform to colonial structures of time (ibid). Rather, he sought to wrench control of time from the British in order to shape a distinctive national time, and thereby claim political authority (ibid: 116). Sarala Devi's meticulously scheduled ashram program resonated with this wider agenda.

After the ashram program, students could complete advanced Basic Education training at Sevagram, the main Gandhian ashram in Wardha. They also journeyed to Bihar to join the Bhoodan movement, and to study at Gandhian institutes in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Traveling and working with villagers throughout India were especially exciting for early students, who often described this to me as "the real work of the ashram." Lakshmi Ashram was closely integrated into the rural society spread though the mountains surrounding its campus, but it was also experienced by early students as something more ineffable than the sum of its buildings and schedules. It was an exhilarating, cosmopolitan process of global connection.¹⁸

Gandhi and Sarala Devi had agreed that she would work at the ashram for twenty years; if she had done well, her former students would then be ready to manage the institution. In 1966 she departed in a huff, carrying only two *khadi* shoulder bags. "The name of Lakshmi Ashram was becoming well known as an ideal institution" she grouched, "To me this did not seem to be a very healthy situation" (Behn 2010: 259). She elaborated,

The social environment and values were rapidly changing. How could we protect our children from their influence? All around us, discarding Gandhi's lifestyle of simplicity and renunciation, people were moving towards a complicated and expensive way of life ... When the ashram began, people showed respect for the simplicity and honest straightforwardness of our girls, and this respect and goodwill encouraged the children's loyalty and respect towards the ashram. However, now people had started making fun of their simple clothes and plain food ... My fellow workers were also feeling the influence of changing social values, and they started to sympathize with the children's dissatisfaction. (ibid: 259-260)

Sarala Devi had no wish revamp the program. She began to envisage "handing the ashram over to the workers and going on ahead in a more revolutionary direction" (ibid: 261). When refused permission to approach the Indian side of the border with Tibet because she was a 'foreigner,' she resolved to leave Kumaon. The refusal interrupted her participation in meetings fellow Gandhians were holding about the boundary dispute between India and China, which she had expected to attend with her old time colleagues from the nationalist movement. Indeed, the expectation by Sarala Devi and her peers that a meeting of regional Gandhian leaders to address a fraught Himalayan border dispute would obviously include her speaks to her intimate status in Uttarakhand's political scene. Her colleagues tried in vain to secure government sanction for her to enter the area. Of her distress while waiting, Sarala Devi proclaimed, "Again, since my arrival in India, whatever decision I sought to take for myself was never realized. Finally I decided to leave the decision to fate—if permission was granted, then I would remain in the hills; if not, then I would go away from the hills, never to return" (ibid: 264). Her ire highlights complexities in her fraught subjectivity. Although Sarala Devi was staunch in her rejection of colonialism, had abjured her place in the colonial order, and strove to claim India as 'home,' in a context of heightened national security she was construed as a colonial figure, not to be trusted, and she was barred from the meeting.

She journeyed to Bihar to join the Bhoodan movement, which Vinoba Bhave had initiated in 1951 with the goal of reform through revolutionary redistribution, to be accomplished through voluntary gifts of land to the landless. Bhoodan ultimately failed because most of the land involved was not effectively redistributed, or it was not arable.¹⁹ When it faltered in the early 1970s, Sarala Devi went to the Chambal Valley to work with families of surrendered bandits. The Sarvodaya movement at that time was complicated by a split between leaders Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash (“J. P.”) Narayan. When Bhoodan floundered, J. P. broke with Bhave’s gentle *satyagraha*, directed to moral reform outside political parties. He took part of the movement in a different direction known as *sampūrṇa kranti* (total revolution). This more assertive *satyagraha* was directed at the corruption of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s government, which responded to this and other challenges by declaring a State of Emergency in June 1975. The Emergency lasted until March 1977; J. P. was arrested but Bhave acquiesced to it.²⁰ Sarala Devi’s memoir provides extensive discussion of Bhoodan, but closes just before the Emergency. Nor did fellow Gandhians shed light on her feelings at the time. However, Radha Behn, a prominent Gandhian and former teacher at and secretary of Lakshmi Ashram, recalled that Sarala Devi considered ‘total revolution’ to be a distraction from Bhoodan and land reform, which she insisted was vital for the nation’s poorest.

Sarala Devi eventually relented and returned to the hills of Kumaon in 1975. She settled in a cottage facing the high peaks, and joined *sarvodaya* workers in efforts to “save the Himalaya” from intensifying ecological and resource crises.²¹ At Sarala Devi’s request, Radha Behn had agreed to succeed her as ashram secretary, and held the post for more than two decades. She became the ashram’s most prominent graduate, highly regarded throughout Indian and some international Gandhian and grassroots networks. Lakshmi Ashram’s work endured with funding from abroad, and grew to an enrollment of about eighty rural girls from poor families, under the guidance of staff members led by secretaries that Radha Behn has mentored. Sarala Devi passed away on 8 July 1982 due to long-suffered ailments. She died in the company of *sarvodaya* colleagues, and was cremated at Lakshmi Ashram according to Hindu rites.

Sarala Devi’s influence in the Uttarakhand Himalaya is expressed through the remarkable range of her students’ activities and achievements. Many went on to lead unusual lives and contest normative gender roles. Several have dedicated their lives to social justice work, some by building careers at Lakshmi Ashram and taking it in new direc-

tions, and others by establishing their own institutions and taking on other unconventional leadership roles. Ashram graduates have collaborated with villagers and others to organize and participate in various social movements. As I have mentioned, they participated in the nationalist movement of the 1940s and in the Bhoodan movement of the 1950s and 60s. They also participated in the Chipko movement of the 1970s and 1980s to halt timber harvest by extra-local firms, and the Uttarakhand movement for a separate hill state in the 1990s. They have protested strip mining, the construction of a large dam (Tehri Dam), and the production, sales and consumption of alcohol, due to the connection of alcoholism to domestic violence and poverty. In the mid-2000s, ashram staff formed an alliance with village women, hill students, scientists, and environmental groups to protect the Kosi River, a regional lifeline.²²

Colonial Feminism in a Postcolonial Nation

Sarala Devi engaged her Himalayan experience with a transnationally constituted desire for justice to articulate an alternative politics of engagement with Indian women through her reform program at Lakshmi Ashram. Like Fabians such as Leonard Woolf, H. G. Wells, and Beatrice and Sidney Webb (and Annie Besant in her early years) who criticized colonialism yet were enthusiastic about the modernizing project often linked to its liberal versions, Sarala Devi felt that Himalayan women needed to *be given* a voice to become empowered agents capable of tapping into their innate strength and initiating changes in their own circumstances. She sought to remove her pupils from the influence of families, peers, and rural ideals of femininity, dress them in homespun cloth, re-educate them about health, hygiene and gender roles, postpone their marriages and, if they chose to marry, arrange their marriages to fellow Gandhians, and produce them anew.

When Gandhi cautioned that it was “not good to fail in any activity that we have begun,” she responded, “After twenty years if some girls, having completed their education, are able to manifest new values of life in the face of a hostile world, then after that I will answer you” (Behn 2010: 173-174). The assumption that she was indeed qualified to reconfigure Himalayan womanhood, as well as the emphasis she placed upon reforming *purdah* and child marriage, educating girls, and hygiene in her program, were in tune with modernizing work undertaken by middle class British feminists. Her coupling of this agenda with an anti-colonial stance was in harmony with the modernizing Fabian agenda. Nevertheless, Sarala Devi’s creative self-positioning and intervention at Lakshmi Ashram were more aligned

with a Gandhian critique of a certain kind of modernity than with the Fabian (and colonial feminist) liberal project of bringing modernity to the colonized. Indeed, in placing a Gandhian critique of modernity at the heart of her educational mission, it is likely that from the point of view of earlier liberal Fabian British feminists—for example, Beatrice Webb—Sarala Devi would have seemed regressive.

Antoinette Burton has suggested that research on British women in India should take up the issue of “...the extent to which socialist or working-class women challenged the premises of liberal middle-class feminism and forged different kinds of relationships with empire and with Indian women, real or imagined” (1994: 211). While ‘speaking for’ Indian women seemed to come as naturally to liberal middle class British feminists as ‘speaking for’ working class women at home (ibid), Sarala Devi’s work does indeed point to different types of relationships that marginalized British women established with Indian women and the project of empire. She believed that once trained to utilize their own courage, Himalayan women could lead their villages in establishing *gram swaraj*, a very different utopia than that imagined by modernizing Fabians or middle class colonial feminists. Radha Behn, also one of her occasional biographers, explained Sarala Devi’s decision to establish Lakshmi Ashram this way,

...seeing [the toiling and strength of rural Pahari women], she became sad that the social rank of such diligent women was assumed to be second rate. [She felt that] for this exact reason, the self-confidence of hill women was weak. [She thought that] awakening morale among Pahari women, through the medium of the family system, would also bolster the energy of their endurance, toil and pathos, and humane strength. Motivated by precisely this idea, on December 5, 1946 she held the founding ceremony of *Kasturba Mahilā Utthān Mandal*... (Trivedi and Bahan 1984: 59)

Radha Behn and other Himalayan women who worked with Sarala Devi felt that she had established the ashram to challenge local ideas about gender and appropriate roles for women. To Indian nationalists and leftists, her position was therefore ambivalent. Her anti-colonial activism was admired, but her mission to reform patriarchal aspects of Himalayan society and family life through social experimentation articulated in some respects with missionary and colonial projects. Like some colonial missionaries, Sarala Devi critiqued aspects of Indian patriarchies, which were connected to the emerging nationalist elite as much as to the colonial order. However, by establishing a

Gandhian program, she deflected much potential Indian criticism by distancing her project from imperialist agendas, and aligning it with the nationalist cause (although many influential Indian nationalists, including Nehru and most Indian communists at the time, had little actual patience for the specifics of the Gandhian program).

Sarala Devi both engaged with and disrupted conventional British middle class feminisms that theorized a ‘backward’ brown sister in need of ‘uplift’ into ‘modernity.’ She did feel that to realize self-confidence, village girls should be removed from repressive social contexts and re-educated. However, her intervention deployed a Gandhian critique of Eurocentric modernity to disrupt colonial feminist assumptions that ‘progress’ did not exist in village life and that Indian women were incapable of self-empowerment. She did not wish to prepare her pupils to leave village life, but rather to inhabit it *differently*. In her memoir, Sarala Devi emphasized her role as one of drawing out inherent leadership qualities. “Dedication to one’s work, a natural affinity with the poorest of the poor, came naturally to our girls,” she averred. “For them it was not a question of making the least possible effort for the uplift of the people, enduring what for them was simply boring employment; rather, it was a mission undertaken to ensure that the poverty-stricken section of society too are empowered to achieve what is rightfully theirs” (Behn 2010: 232-233). Here Sarala Devi effaces herself—these are pupils’ ‘natural’ qualities—but naturalizes her own authority as one who is qualified to foster the character development of Himalayan girls.

Sarala Devi also challenged conventions for European women, who were expected to be subordinate to and supportive of white male imperialists. She rejected colonial patriarchy, which needed European women to be threatened by and protected from colonized peoples. Instead, in her memoir and former students’ descriptions, Sarala Devi implied a transnational class of rural, female agriculturalists, or “daughters of Nature,” whose “toiling and strength” exceeded that of their elite Indian and European sisters, and of their own men, but whose “self-confidence” was “second rate” due to capitalist, imperial and patriarchal exploitation (and exploits). Her memoir also gestures toward this idea in reverent references to serving Mother Nature (through farming) as a practice of self-purification that is not bound to a particular place. In this way, her feminist agenda was articulated not only in relation to men and the environment, but also in relation to other women, and included a transnational, class-based analysis.²³

Sarala Devi's life and work were made possible (and problematic) by her uneasy positionings in particular historical contexts, and by a number of intersecting ideas, discourses and ideologies. She drew on colonialist, Gandhian, Fabian modernist, and feminist ideas and discourses, but without fully accepting any of them. Her position as a colonial woman doing anticolonial work made it possible for her mission to reform Himalayan womanhood to be taken seriously by male nationalists, despite her marginalized position in Britain. The ideological project of Fabian reformism and liberal colonialism—that is, the notion of bringing 'modernity' to colonized peoples—justified some aspects of Sarala Devi's program. However, her intervention was more aligned with Gandhi's stance that the basic assumptions of the modern West are barbaric, and she sought to train her students to tap into their own strength to spread Gandhi's vision of *gram swaraj* in Uttarakhand. This suggests that Sarala Devi did see rural Himalayan women as agents, not just objects of reform.

Like Mira Behn, Philip Spratt, Verrier Elwin, and J. B. S. Haldane, Sarala Devi took Gandhi's thought in new directions.²⁴ She did so by founding a Gandhian school for Himalayan girls that nevertheless contested much of Gandhi's patriarchal thinking. While Gandhi's middle class, upper caste construction of 'women' placed them primarily in the home (Patel 1988), Sarala Devi placed ashram sisters in the field, both literally and as *sarvodaya* workers. She insisted that her students take up meaningful roles outside of the household as wives and mothers, not only as renunciate 'sisters.' The politics of colonialism that she fought also created the possibility for her own uneasy subject position, shaped her reformist agenda, and provided some ideological justification for her work. At the same time, through engagement with Gandhian ideals and the politics of her own marginalized position, she managed to challenge a civilizing mission that generally denied Indian women subjectivity, assumed British superiority, and precluded genuine alliance between British and Indian women. That these contradictory currents placed Sarala Devi in a difficult space is evident in the restive tone of her memoir, where she endeavors to situate her "...personal experiences in the context of the general background of the time," (Behn 2010: xv) and never quite finds a "home" for herself.²⁵

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Endnotes

1. *Sūryoday* (*Sunrise*) is a Hindi magazine produced at Lakshmi Ashram. This is my translation from the first issue.
2. My approach is informed by critical feminist analyses of imperialism, including Sangari and Vaid (1989); Strobel (1991); Pratt (1992); Suleri (1992); Burton (1994); Jayawardena (1995); McClintock (1995); Grewal (1996); Sinha (2006). I also draw upon ethnographic fieldwork in the Uttarakhand Himalaya during the 1990s and 2000s.
3. The central arguments of the piece identified here are largely embedded in and explored through a narrative approach. This privileges broad readability for an interdisciplinary journal; but, indeed, I balk at doing otherwise when writing about an ardent populist like Sarala Devi. Key theoretical issues at stake do receive more explicit attention in the final section.
4. David Hopkins shared this anecdote.
5. Antoinette Burton argues that, "saving Indian women was as much a part of the civilizing mission for feminists as it had been for generations of colonial policymakers who had insisted on the abolition of suttee..." (1994: 208).

6. For a detailed portrait of Lakshmi Ashram and the perspectives of two generations of Himalayan women who attended the school, please see Klenk's (2010) ethnography. This essay builds upon the introduction to Sarala Devi offered in that account.

7. In the first paragraph of her memoir, Sarala Devi declares, "My mother was English, my paternal grandmother had come from the Black Forest of Wurttemberg, and her son (my father) had been born in Switzerland. Along with my grandmother he had come via France to England. Thus I had not absorbed narrow-minded attitudes with regard to nation or language" (Behn 2010: 1).

8. This quotation and all others from Behn (2010) are from David Hopkins' English translation of Sarala Devi's (1979) Hindi-language memoir. Since I have quoted the memoir extensively, I requested and received the translator's permission and the publisher's permission to do so.

9. On 12 March 1930, Gandhi led a large procession on a 241 mile march to the seaside at Dandi to harvest salt in order to protest the colonial salt tax and monopoly.

10. *Khadi* is homegrown, hand-spun silk, cotton or woolen thread that has been hand-woven into cloth.

11. Mahila Ashram was a training center for women and girls, and part of a Gandhian ashram community that included Sevagram. Gandhi settled there in 1936, and Sarala Behn met Mira Behn there.

12. Sarvodaya work is performed for the spiritual and material welfare of all, and an expression of Gandhi's idea that a spiritual revolution was vital for real *swaraj* (independence). For further discussion of *sarvodaya* in the context of Gandhi's utopian ideals, please see Fox (1989).

13 Please see Klenk (2010: 32-40) for a discussion that places Lakshmi Ashram in the context of debates about education and national development in India.

14. Prominent nationalists, including nationalist feminists debated the design of gendered educational programs. For a history of the women's movement and feminisms in India, see Kumar (1993). Nita Kumar argues that, "the bottom-line argument in favor of girls' education was throughout that they were the future mothers of the country" (2005: 173). Yet, Kumar also points out that, "most of the founders and administrators of schools (for girls) and a great many of the teachers were not mothers, but were either widowed and childless or unmarried or separated and alone" (ibid: 174).

15. Gandhi designed Basic Education to challenge the colonial regime by expanding educational practices into rural daily life, rather than limiting them to textbooks and

the classroom. He believed that village-relevant education was required for real independence (Gandhi 1951).

16. Lisa Trivedi has argued that, "When Gandhi asked women to give up their regular clothing and jewelry, he was asking them to relinquish material links to kin. Thus the adoption of *khadi* and rejection of ornament was not only a critique of Western modernity, it was simultaneously a revision of 'traditional' community in so far as it foregrounded women's relationship to the nation at the expense of relationships to family, caste, or class groups" (2007: 71).

17. Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (2006) analyze Gandhi's concern with time and scheduling.

18. There is far more to be said about Sarala Devi's early pupils than space permits; please see chapters three and four in Klenk (2010) for detailed discussion and analysis.

19. David Hardiman (2003: 202-207) analyzes Bhavé's involvement and the failure of the Bhoodan movement. Ramachandra Guha (1998a: 101-105) provides a critical analysis of Bhavé.

20. My discussion of the Sarvodaya movement is derived from Hardiman (2003: 210-212).

21. Sarala Devi's publications on the environment include *Sanrakshan ya Vināsh (Paryāvaranīy Paristhiti: Ek Chunautī)* Protection or Destruction (Environmental Circumstances: A Challenge) Nainital: Gyanoday Prakashan, 1981; and *Revive Our Dying Planet: An Ecological, Socio-economical and Cultural Appeal*, Nainital: Gyanoday Prakashan, 1982. She used an award she received from the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation in honor of her *sarvodaya* work to establish a trust to support work to protect the Himalayan environment.

22. The extensive, inspiring accomplishments of the school and its students cannot be adequately portrayed in a simple paragraph. They are the topic of my recent ethnography, Klenk (2010), which provides a full description and analysis of the ashram program and the ways in which Sarala Devi's students contested normative gender roles, and of their innovative social justice work across two generations.

23. Inderpal Grewal's (1996) analysis of connections between English feminism, nationalism, and imperialism inspired this point.

24. Ramachandra Guha ponders the ways in which figures like Mira Behn, Spratt, Elwin, and Haldane took Gandhi's "...thought in directions the Mahatma himself might hardly have anticipated" (1998b: 137).

25. As I finalize this essay, I must note an intriguing new juxtaposition. The Uttarakhand Government and Lakshmi

Ashram have collaborated on a new Sarala Behn Memorial Museum, just opened in Kausani, the town closest to the ashram. Its construction has catalyzed renovation and new developments in the adjacent building, including a rather different sort of ashram collaboration, on a rural business process outsourcing (BPO) venture to generate employment for local youth.

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