
Personal Reflections

by

*Radha Behn Bhatt**

I was born into an ordinary hardworking farming family in a very remote Himalayan village. My father was in the army and so had seen much of India, and had also served in some middle-east countries. Thus his outlook on life was somewhat more open and progressive than the other people of our village. He gave us daughters the opportunity of getting an education and of finding our own ways to run our lives.

However, the society as a whole in which I was growing up during my childhood was not lagging behind in the old traditions regarding girls, their illiteracy or early marriage. As a teenager, I had to struggle against such circumstances. My father supported me to a great extent to continue my studies and saved me from a child marriage. I was able to continue my education in an Inter-College up to the eleventh standard, but had to leave halfway through the year because the pressure of prospective marriage suitors was too intense.

The families of prospective grooms according to our traditions started to visit my parents to seek to arrange a marriage to their sons when I was only fourteen years old. I was saved for three years for my father would repeatedly tell them, "I am happy with your family and your suitable son, but I will arrange this wedding only if my daughter will agree to it".

I never agreed to any one of these suitors because I did not want to get married, instead I wanted to do social service, especially for the women of our mountains. Even at that young age I could see the hard and restricted lives of the village women around me. Then I was studying in a school started by a leader and monk of the Arya Samaj. As students, we were listening to the lectures that were highlighting the prevalent illiteracy among the women and the lack of opportunities for them to play

* Radha Bhatt, affectionately known as Radha Behn, was born in the remote hill village of Dhurka on 16 October 1933. When she was 16, Radha joined Lakshmi Ashram and Sarala Behn, and it was from here that she began the journey that has led her to be recognised at the national and international level as a Gandhian worker. For twenty years she worked alongside Sarala Behn both in Lakshmi Ashram and in the rural communities. From those early days she was active in social movements, especially the anti-liquor struggles and then the Chipko movement for forest rights of the local communities. The eighties saw her actively involved in struggles against uncontrolled mining in these hills and the Tehri Dam, then under construction. Recent decades have seen her assume national level responsibilities, as secretary of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, chairperson of Sarva Seva Sangh and also of the Gandhi Peace Foundation.

a useful role in society. The Arya Samaj was actively promoting education of the girl child. I feel that being exposed to these ideas strengthened my thoughts and assisted in clarifying my decision.

In the end my father grew a little tired of my stubbornness to do social service, for as an ex-army man he knew little or nothing about social service. He was wondering where I could go to pursue this, how I could initially get myself involved in social service. He asked his friends and one of them told him about a lady of the Congress Party or a lady freedom fighter who had started an ashram for girls. This was how Lakshmi Ashram and Sarala Behn came into my life.

It was the last day of 1950 when I arrived in Lakshmi Ashram and first set eyes on Sarala Behn. I liked her because she gave me a very warm welcome, and she was happy with a smiling face. However, she was very adamant on her principles, something that I experienced from the very first day.

Sarala Behn was highly esteemed in our state, as well as among Gandhian institutions and workers throughout the whole country. She was certainly a Western woman by birth, having grown up in London, but after coming to India her lifestyle became totally Indian, wearing Indian clothes, speaking, reading and writing in Hindi, and eating the same food as the local people ate. She dedicated her whole life to this country, something the Indian society admired very highly, and she was loved by the common people.

Lakshmi Ashram is situated high on a south facing slope overlooking the beautiful Kosi valley, and if one was to climb to the crest of the ridge then one looked north down to the Katyur valley and behind on the northern horizon to the high snow peaks. This view never fails to charm one, even today. The ashram campus is bounded on two sides by open pine forest where we teachers and girls would go to gather firewood or else accompany the grazing cows. I was very much attracted to these beautiful surroundings from the very beginning of my ashram life.

Lakshmi Ashram sought to follow Gandhi's thoughts on education, with the integrated develop of the child's personality, that is to say her head (intellect), hands and heart – an integrated balance of manual and intellectual activities, so that the girl was equally competent in both spheres of life. I was attracted by his teaching of no discrimination based on caste, colour or religious faith. I sought to apply these values in my own life, which was very easy in the surroundings of the ashram, however I also applied these values in my own family. I was happy that my parents accepted these values and put them into practice themselves. Then of course there was the ashram motto of self reliance, another one of Gandhi's teachings, that gave a strong support and foundation to my ideas about my own life. Besides these two values of non-discrimination and self reliance, simple living and high thinking, caring and protecting the environment, and considering women on par with men, are all followed by the Ashram.

Sarala Behn loved pets and domestic animals, such as dogs and cats, and cows, and was extremely fond of nature – trees and flowers, rivers and mountains. She loved to work in the garden and walk in the forest. She was not even scared of the wild animals found in the forest such as leopards. She was a vegetarian, though using milk products, and the ashram community is also vegetarian in the same way. I was vegetarian since I was six or seven years old and am still vegetarian.

I know Vimala Behn very well. From the time that I joined the ashram life until now, she is my best friend. We had worked together in the ashram as teachers, also having responsibilities for caring for the younger girls, as well as working together for the hill farming women of the surrounding valleys. Then she married Sunderlal Bahuguna and started a small but similar educational ashram in the valley of the Bhilangana River in Garhwal. We still kept in contact with one another through letters, occasionally visiting one another or meeting up in meetings, conferences, social movements or protests. Even today we are contact with one another.

I learned very much from Sarala Behn for my life – the thoughts, the practice and the commitment. She was a very practical individual and always sought to implement the Gandhian principles with total honesty. I tried to learn from her, but sometimes I did not agree with her, when I felt that her decisions were a bit too harsh and I felt that they should be milder. I accompanied her on long *padyatras* (walking on foot) for the Bhoodan-Gramdan movement. We were together for the liquor prohibition movements and for a short time for the Chipko movement. She was 81 when she fell ill and I nursed her for 3½ months, and was with her at her very end as she died peacefully in her bed.

I fully agreed with her work for the mountain women, the Himalayan environment and other Gandhian activities, because serving the women had also been my dream project from my youth. By studying Gandhian thought and understanding the situation in India and abroad, I was convinced that the path which Gandhi had shown to the world is the only way to save humanity. The activities of Lakshmi Ashram, both within the campus and in the surrounding community were the practical models of that philosophy. At the beginning Sarala Behn had started the ashram with just five girls. When I joined the ashram in January 1951 there were 15-16 girls, while we were some 7-8 workers with different responsibilities such as caring for the cows, looking after the office, working in the nearby villages in the Kosi valley. Others were teachers, at the same time looking after the hostel and mess. The number of girls and teachers increased and the ideal number was considered to be around eighty.

Lakshmi Ashram is run by a registered body under the Societies Registration Act, called Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal, and its executive board takes care of the policies along with other rules and regulations. The secretary has always been the person mainly responsible for running the different activities. For the first twenty years Sarala Behn was the institution's secretary, and was the main guide for the activities of the ashram. Following her I assumed the responsibilities of the post of secretary for more than 22 years. Following me an ex-student of the ashram, Pushpa Joshi, held the responsibility for some fifteen years, and now Neema Vaishnava is the secretary. She too is a former student and worker of the ashram. Most of the workers who have responsibility for the various departments of the ashram are former students. Together they collectively run all the activities of the ashram harmoniously. Lakshmi Ashram was a kind of mother institution for the Gandhian workers in our state, and it still informally plays this role.