

Ecology and Ethics

Bidisha Mallik

Legends in Gandhian Social Activism: Mira Behn and Sarala Behn

Addressing Environmental Issues By
Dissolving Gender And Colonial Barriers

 Springer

Ecology and Ethics

Series Editor

Ricardo Rozzi, University of NorthTexas, Denton, TX, USA

This series is devoted to continuing research at the interfaces of ecology and ethics (embedded in the multiple fields of philosophy and ecology) to broaden our conceptual and practical frameworks in this transdisciplinary field. Confronted with global environmental change, the academic community still labors under a tradition of strong disciplinary dissociation that hinders the integration of ecological understanding and ethical values to comprehensively address the complexities of current socio-ecological problems. During the 1990s and 2000s, a transdisciplinary integration of ecology with social disciplines, especially economics, has been institutionalized via interdisciplinary societies, research programs, and mainstream journals. Work at this interface has produced novel techniques and protocols for assessing monetary values of biodiversity and ecosystem services, as illustrated by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. At the beginning of the 2010s, however, an equivalent integration between ecology and philosophy still remains elusive. This series undertakes the task to develop crucial theoretical and practical linkages between ecology and ethics through interdisciplinary, international, collaborative teamwork. It aims to establish a new forum and research platform to work on this vital, but until now insufficiently researched intersection between the descriptive and normative domains. The scope of this series is to facilitate the exploration of sustainable and just ways of co-inhabitation among diverse humans, and among humans and other-than-human co-inhabitants with whom we share our heterogeneous planet. It will address topics integrating the multiple fields of philosophy and ecology such as biocultural homogenization, Planetary or Earth Stewardship.

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Bidisha Mallik
Politics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs
University of Washington Tacoma
Tacoma, WA, USA

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*Dedicated to the loving memory of my
grandparents, Kalidas De (1915–2003) and
Neela De (1925–2006), who gave me
thought, love, hope, and courage.*

We should learn the poor man's art of living. I know that I am the greatest hindrance in our march towards that ideal. You and other survivors will have to arrange many things that by my identification with them, have been or will be left as they should not be.

– Gandhi to Mira Behn, 1932

The tragedy today is that the educated and moneyed classes are altogether out of touch with the vital fundamentals of existence – our Mother Earth, and the animal and vegetable population which she sustains. ...We have got to study Nature's balance, and develop our lives within her laws, if we are to survive as physically healthy and morally decent species.

– Mira Behn. April 24, 1949

The rise of men will not lead to Sarvodaya [universal uplift], and until the women ... get support, or women do not themselves become the source of the power to guide in this path, our movement will not be successful.

– Sarala Behn, February 10, 1962.

Foreword

Anyone even half-interested in Gandhi has probably heard of his English associate, Madeleine Slade or Mira Behn. Those who explore the hills of Uttarakhand and talk with locals may still hear of her work there, and they are likely also to be told of another Gandhi associate of British origin once active in those hills: Sarala Behn, as Catherine Mary Heilemann had become known. Both women died in 1982.

In the 1970s, a quarter century after Gandhi's assassination, when attention was drawn by the Chipko or tree-hugging movement in these hills, and again in the 1980s, when construction there of a high Tehri Dam was vigorously opposed, light fell on an amazing community of local activists. Peasant-women, journalists, and poets were found using Gandhian nonviolence to protect the rivers, trees, and fragile Himalayan hills they lived amidst and loved. The world seemed to sit up and take notice of a community that was defying state power to save the environment.

This study by Bidisha Mallik reveals the foundational role played in these satyagrahas by the two British "Behns," even though Mira Behn had left Uttarakhand (and India) in 1959. Working independently of each other, the two "English-Indians" forming this duo may not even have met each other in the hilly state. Sarala Behn devoted herself to Uttarakhand's eastern or Kumaon region (where she died), while Mira Behn lived for a decade in the western Garhwal hills. After leaving India and making Austria her base, Mira Behn continued to prod and counsel Garhwali activists. As Mallik puts it:

Abjuring western privileges, these women wholeheartedly embraced lives of voluntary poverty, lived and worked *with* and *amongst* the poorest of India, participated in India's independence movement, and went to prison for the cause. Their faith in nonviolence and their passion to eradicate colonialist, capitalist, patriarchal, and racist ideologies through humanitarian service brought them to Gandhi's constructive social work.

Bidisha Mallik's study is remarkable for several reasons. For one thing, her primary interest is in the individuals Mira Behn and Sarala Behn (who was younger by 9 years), not in their roles as Gandhi's colleagues, or in their relationships with Gandhi.

Mallik brings out the contrasting backgrounds that shaped the two. Madeleine was the privileged daughter of a Sir Edmond, who was an admiral as well. Catherine had a much humbler start. Also, unlike the all-British Madeleine, Catherine could count a European (Swiss-German) among her forebears.

The author presents the two women in their global context, not merely as characters in an Indian story. As young women, both Madeleine and Catherine were troubled by the jingoism that seemed part of the British response to World War I, and by the toll the war took on young lives across Europe.

Mallik's examination of the two women, and of the Himalayan region impacted by them, is enriched by her evident immersion in a range of disciplines—economics, ecology, aesthetics, sociology, cultural studies, religious studies, and more. Adding to the weight of her account and analysis is the range of her interviews. Mallik seems to have talked with scores of people in the Uttarakhand hills, in Austria, elsewhere in Europe, and in the UK.

She stresses the communitarian character of the two inter-connected campaigns. Acknowledging the roles of well-known, dedicated, and innovative leaders like Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt, of poets like Sailani and Prasoon, and of several others, Mallik suggests that it was the combined effort of large numbers that made the difference. How the community spirit was sustained is part of her inquiry.

However, this book is not a study of the two movements. The author's primary aim is to examine the roles played by the two Behns.

Sarala Behn, social activist and grassroot revolutionary who, among other things, mastered Hindi, emerges as a most effective team builder and institution builder. Mira Behn, on the other hand, is scholarly, artistic in temperament, and musical. (Beethoven had captured her and so had Gandhi.) Mallik recognizes her as a pioneer who saw early and clearly that trees were critical to the survival of the Himalayas, who never ceased to remind Garhwalis of this, and who also warned the leaders of independent India, who had been her colleagues in the effort for freedom, of the precariousness of the great mountains.

Mallik's research supplies a corrective to the story that Mira Behn's return to Austria in the late 1950s was some kind of a rebound from Gandhi to her first hero, Ludwig van Beethoven. Mallik's findings that music did not leave Mira Behn during her three decades and more in India, and that Gandhi remained her life interest in her final years in Austria, confirm what I had noticed in the 1970s while visiting Mira Behn in her cottage in the woods outside Vienna.

Maintaining that Gandhi's Quit India call had been necessary in 1942 ("A push was needed," she said, pushing the air with her arm as she spoke), Mira Behn (a fellow prisoner, in 1942–44, in Pune's Aga Khan Palace with Gandhi, Kasturba, and others) also recalled Gandhi's "beautiful voice" when, evidently, he sang a bhajan solo early one morning in Sabarmati, other Ashramites not having arrived.

Scholars of Gandhi's impact on African American strategies in the USA will be interested in Mallik's account of Mira Behn's meeting with the thinker Howard Thurman when she visited the USA, which was two years before the significant 1936 encounter, occurring in Bardoli in Gujarat, between Thurman and Gandhi.

I think Mallik is right in asking us to link the Uttarakhand efforts of Sarala Behn and Mira Behn to “Gandhi’s aim to create a decentralized, nonviolent, and autonomous body of leaders who would undertake the responsibility of attaining village self-reliance in India,” enabling “political power [to] lie in the hands of India’s vast rural communities rather than the central apparatus of the state.” This aim was spelt out, Mallik reminds us, in what has been described as Gandhi’s last wish: the proposal he drafted a day before his death for the Congress to transform itself, political independence having been achieved, into an association for serving the people in their villages.

In Sarala Behn’s “Blue-Print for Survival of the Hills,” which is seen as her last will, she placed four goals (Mallik tells us) before Uttarakhand’s Sarvodaya workers. They should save the mountains’ green cover, reduce the burden on the hill woman’s head and back, keep the mountain society addiction free, and strengthen its thinking and education through good literature.

In telling the story of the Behns, this study underscores something easy to overlook, which is that Sarvodaya, the welfare of all, is as central a Gandhi legacy as Satyagraha, or nonviolent struggle for justice.

Mallik also points out that the roles of Sarala Behn and Mira Behn went beyond faithfully implementing Gandhi’s vision. The two were innovative, autonomous women who supplemented Gandhi’s ideas with what their years in England and Europe in the shattering opening decades of the twentieth century had equipped them with: a devotion to individual liberty and human equality, which, one might add, was in complete harmony with Gandhi’s own worldview.

Those curious about environmental or feminist questions, or about Gandhian or colonial matters, or about relationships between “brown” Indians and “white” Westerners, will find interesting material in Bidisha Mallik’s study. I congratulate and thank her.

Research Professor at Center for South Asian
and Middle Eastern Studies
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Champaign, Illinois

Rajmohan Gandhi
November 18, 2020

Foreword by Rozzi et al.

The life and philosophy of Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi is well known and has had an enduring influence on social and environmental movements in India and globally. In contrast, the life, work, and philosophy of two European women who collaborated closely with Gandhi, Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn) and Catherine Mary Heilemann (Sarala Behn), have been underappreciated. This book fills this gap by focusing on these two contrasting British thinkers and activists who played crucial roles in biocultural conservation. Bidisha Mallik interweaves social, cultural, environmental, and ethical dimensions that nourished the innovative work of these women who developed their own autonomous character as Gandhi developed his ideals on human equality and harmony with nature.

For the Ecology and Ethics book series, Mallik's contribution is essential to overcome a patriarchal tradition of praising individual heroes without doing justice to the fact that social-environmental processes are community driven, mostly by anonymous committed individuals from different ages, genders, and often from different nationalities. Today, Mallik's engaging narrative is inspiring beyond India by dissolving racist prejudices and unfolding the strength of collaborations among women from the Global South and the Global North to confront ecological and ethical challenges.

Bidisha Mallik's book identifies and analyzes the heterogeneous historical contexts, cultural traditions, discourses, and skills that created the conditions for the possibility of their community activism and for sustaining the Gandhian project. Their shifting subjectivity, intercultural dialogues, and collaborations cross local and transnational negotiations with colonial, modernist, feminist, Gandhian, and liberation discourses in their mission of social and environmental solidarity. Discourses unfold with actions and practice. Mallik highlights how the integration of theory and practice was essential in Mira Behn's preparation. She observes that before Mira Behn departed for India,

She put herself through a year's stringent self-imposed trial so as to be fit physically and spiritually before she joined Gandhi's ashram. She became a teetotaler and vegetarian, she sat cross-legged and slept on the floor, and began learning Urdu, a difficult language. Realizing the import of Gandhi's constructive program for self-reliance, and the philosophy

of Khadi or hand-spun cotton, for communal unity and economic freedom of the masses from British imperialism, Madeleine learned carding, spinning, and weaving at Kensington Weavers and also subscribed to the weekly paper of Gandhi, *Young India*. Moreover, to enhance her physical stamina and perseverance in doing difficult and hard manual labor, she went to Switzerland to work with the poor Swiss peasants in their hayfields in the heat of the summer. (Mallik, p. 37–38)

The depth of Mallik's research is remarkable, sometimes resolving mysteries in the literature in the field. An example is her discussion of the origin of a famous Chipko slogan. Many sources refer to a confrontation between local forest women protesting the felling of the Advani forest and a divisional forest officer who mockingly questioned, "Do you know what the forests bear? Resin, timber, and foreign exchange!" Their reply was a four-line slogan in Hindi that has come to identify the Chipko movement:

*Kya Hain Jangal Ka Upkaar
Mitti Paani Aur Bayar
Mitti Paani Aur Bayar
Zinda Rehne Ka Adhar.*

Translated, it reads:

What do the forests bear?
Soil, water, and pure air!
Soil, water, and pure air,
Are the basis of all life!

But how could Garhwali forest women with little if any knowledge of Hindi have spontaneously composed such a slogan? Malik reveals that it was part of a ten-line poem composed by Kunwar Prasoon which the women had committed to memory, and which until now was practically unknown. She renders the poem in full:

*Aaj Himalay Jagega
Kruur Kulhara Bhagega
Kya Hain Jangal Ka Upkaar?
Mitti, Paani Aur Bayar!
Mitti, Paani, Aur Bayar,
Zinda Rehne Ka Adhar.
Bhale Kulhare Chamkenge
Hum Peron Par Chipkenge
Peron Par Hathiyar Uthenge
Hum Bhi Unke Saath Katenge!*

Translated by Malik it reads:

The Himalayas will awake today
The cruel ax will be chased away!
What do the forests bear?
Soil, water, and pure air.
Soil, water, and pure air,
Are the basis of all life!
So, let the axes shine,
The trees our arms will entwine!
When on the trees the ax will fall,
We'll be cut with them, withal. (Mallik, p. 280, 351)

Bidisha Mallik offers clues to understand the contributions of Mira Behn and Sarala Behn in a way that transforms the compartmentalized scholarly understanding of social or environmental problems. It also adds to a grounded understanding of the complexity and multiple facets of feminist or peasant's rights or religious movements. By weaving these threads together, Mallik brings pressingly needed insights about the complex, intersectional, international, and intercultural nature of the theory and praxis of biocultural conservation.

This book offers an enjoyable narrative written by someone personally rooted in India, which sets this volume apart from others that have been written with a more abstract and theoretical focus. The genesis of Mallik's work is in her existential commitment to the Himalayan ecosystems and people. Hence, it reaches beyond academic concerns by being committed to environmental movements in India. However, the implications go beyond the Himalayas by disclosing concepts and documenting historical processes that involve collective actions with participation of multiple and complementary disciplines. Particularly, it illustrates the crucial role played by women from different cultures, languages, and ages.

Mallik herself experienced these intersectional dimensions in her life. She did her undergraduate studies in geography and cartography at the University of Calcutta. Then, her interest in environmental studies motivated her to travel to the United Kingdom where she completed a master's course in environment and development in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. After graduating, Bidisha returned to India to pursue environmental journalism and research in the Himalayan Mountains. Her experiences in pressing social and environmental issues in northern India motivated her to travel abroad again, this time to complete a doctoral degree in philosophy at the University of North Texas in the United States. Her dissertation is the basis of this book, which today stimulates a biocultural conscience that is vital to promote more sustainable and just futures in the Himalayas as well as globally. We appreciate Bidisha's contribution that discloses multifaceted intercultural processes, which enable us to better participate in this global endeavor for justice and sustainability.

Department of Philosophy and Religion -Subantarctic
Biocultural Conservation Program
University of North Texas
Denton, TX, USA

Ricardo Rozzi

Department of Philosophy and Religion -Subantarctic
Biocultural Conservation Program
University of North Texas
Denton, TX, USA

Roy May

Department of Philosophy and Religion -Subantarctic
Biocultural Conservation Program
University of North Texas
Denton, TX, USA

George James

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Like all stories about the life and work of people who dared to see a better and a just world, this one remains incomplete. I have incorporated many voices and perspectives, and especially from those who knew Mira Behn and Sarala Behn from close counters. But this story is only part of a much longer story of humanity’s struggle for peace, justice, and the ecological health of our planet. I hope this work inspires others to continue the struggle.