CHAPTER 2
MADELEINE/MIRA AND CATHERINE/SARALA:
SISTERS IN THE GANDHIAN FOLD?

By God’s infinite blessing I had arrived, not on the outer edge of Bapu’s activities, but right in the intimate heart of his daily life (Miraben, The Spirit’s Pilgrimage, 69).

The voluntary sacrifice of special privileges, whether in the form of land, wealth, knowledge or education—this is the essence of Gandhiji’s teachings (Sarala Devi, Vyavaharik Vedanta: Ek Atmakatha, 4).

Among Gandhi’s female Western disciples in India, an Englishwoman Madeleine Slade (1892-1982), or Mira Behn, as she came to be called, is well-known. Lesser known than Slade, but equally if not more active in the Gandhian movement, was another English woman Katherine Mary Heilemann (1901-1982), later to be called Sarala Devi, the name under which her autobiography was published. This chapter discusses their diverse life trajectories via a comparative lens.

The two women offer a study in contrast. The figure of Mira is ubiquitous – in journalism, in scholarly accounts, histories, photographs and even in fictionalized form in Sudhir Kakar’s Mira and the Mahatma. Sarala is more elusive, her identity subsumed under that of Lakshmi Ashram, an inspiring though consciously secluded residential school for girls in Kausani in the Kumaon hills, currently in the state of Uttarakhand. Inspired by Gandhi’s philosophy of Basic Education or “New Education” (Nai Talim), a radical new concept in education that took a holistic view of the student as a productive yet progressive member of a rural community, it emphasizes shared productive labor, self-sufficiency, active engagement with the community along Gandhian lines, and confidence-building. Despite the fact that a close reading of her life reveals how she failed to achieve precisely these cherished Gandhian values – of independence of spirit and self-sufficiency in a productive engagement with the social context – it is Mira, and not Sarala, who is today remembered in historical narratives of that phase of Indian history. This is partly due
to their varied modes of engagement with Gandhi and Mira’s sheer physical proximity to Gandhi for 22 years, as evidenced in photographs, as well as the glamour of her background as the daughter of an English Admiral. Further, the very personal nature of her engagement with Gandhi fed speculation of the kind indulged in by Sudhir Kakar in ways that render Sarala’s quieter but more lasting contribution muted.

Like Heilemann, Slade too arrived from England, drawn to India by a sense of a calling. Their autobiographies are powerfully individuated testimonies to their unusual life-choices and personal evolution, involving an active negotiation with ideas of West and East, with femininity and gender, and with the very idea of the nation, both in terms of their nation of origin and in terms of India’s nascent nationalism. This chapter examines the vocationally driven relocations of the two women, explores the syncretic inclusivity of the Gandhian Ashram and agenda as agents for social and political change, and the subtle shades of difference they could accommodate. It also suggests how Gandhi as a figure could be differently enabling for his followers. While Mira’s was a personal engagement that renders Gandhi primarily as a figure of charismatic authority, a ‘guru’ in the stereotypical mode with all its attendant risks, Sarala’s successful attempt to follow the values and principles rather than the person makes for a necessary corrective as it offers a more balanced assessment of Gandhi and also draws much needed attention to a neglected aspect of his notion of poorna swaraj, the constructive programme “designed to build up the nation from the very bottom upward” (Constructive Programme n.p.).

**Part I: Madeleine Slade: The Aristocratic Gypsy**

Slade’s life trajectory, and the mode of its telling, takes a circular shape as she returned to Europe at the very end after a troubled engagement with Gandhi and his vision of service to the nation. Though born into an upper class English home in 1892, she indicates her difference from mainstream Englishness early in the text. Her genealogical narrative serves to prefigure the life to follow:

In my mother’s family there was an unusual strain which had come down through several generations. A great-great-grandfather, while he
was on duty abroad, had fallen in love with a dark gypsy-like beauty who was possibly of Eastern European origin. He married her and brought her home to England. Her exotic characteristics passed into the succeeding generations of that English family, showing sometimes more, sometimes less – but there it was, and it had come again strongly in my mother, and from her it has come to me in many a blessing. Mother’s family was unusual and never a slave to convention, but Father’s family was decidedly conventional, with an aristocratic society touch about it which did not quite suit my temperament (The Spirit’s Pilgrimage 17-18).

Even her paternal great grandfather, a General in the army, had

\[ \text{… the hobby of rolling the lawns with the garden roller, regardless of the fact that there were plenty of gardeners … he would brook no interference ….This habit of doing manual work in the garden was a characteristic of my maternal grandfather also. Besides the more gentlemanly jobs of grafting roses and the like, he delighted in sweeping the garden paths with a long besom broom… (18-19).} \]

In her autobiographical retelling of her life, she deploys the trope of dual miscegenation – racial and vocational – to suggest a familial inheritance that predisposes her to coming to India and following Gandhi. The gypsy outcast, the aristocratic eccentric and a mystical strain comprise the final persona that is Mirabehn: “While I was still very small, five or six years old, inspite of the happy and loving surroundings in which I lived, my mind began to search in the region of the unknowable and was stricken with awe” (20). The autobiography, aptly titled The Spirit’s Pilgrimage, is prefaced by a short narrative marked out from the main text typographically, in being italicised, and stylistically, in the use of language redolent of epiphany and achieved wisdom:

\[ \text{It was a lovely spot on the shore of the Arabian Sea. I was standing there in the spray of the breaking waves, and gazing out on the vast stormy ocean, when a solitary, pure white bird passed over the waters. To me, at that moment, it was symbol of the Soul passing over the} \]
Ocean of Life – detached and peaceful. For is not that what the soul within us is – and which we realize in the rare moments when we become conscious of or inmost selves?

That feeling comes clear and simple in one’s early years, without one’s knowing what it is. And then, with God’s grace, it may begin to come clearer in later days, now with something of conscious understanding, as the joys and sorrows of life fall into their true perspective (10).

As her autobiography later indicates and her unpublished correspondence demonstrates, the actual contours of her life were anything but “detached and peaceful”. The autobiographer’s retrospective vision is at play here in the order and structure it seeks in a turbulent life. This calmly meditative tone is not only undercut at various points in the text but the careful exclusion from her published letters of much of that turbulence reveals careful editorial reordering.

She projects her youth as potentially radical, as questioning the religious and political common sense of the world she inhabits: “The church attitude about Heaven and Hell also worried me a lot. How could people be fixed up for eternity as the fruits of one short life, especially as no two people had the same opportunity for winning through? What about people who died young, and what about poor coloured people, who, I heard, were all heathens? Obviously something was wrong” (20). The child’s radical innocence at the inexplicable ‘logic’ of the adult world is continuous with the text’s invocation of childhood as a privileged phase of native Rousseau-ist democracy of sentiment unclouded by socially acquired duplicity along with a discourse of Nature as teacher and healer, which Madeleine then connects to the Gandhian vision. The autobiography merges these tropes with the quest motif to satisfy the protagonists’ longing for meaningful vocation. The “solitary, pure white bird” flies over many a “vast stormy ocean”, literalizing the metaphor in her journey to India and its “poor coloured people”. However, the limits of Mira’s engagement with the political are indicated by her somewhat solipsistic frame where a powerful personal pull towards charismatic figures overtakes a considered politics as the well spring of her vocational journey.
This is signaled by another epiphany from early childhood, one that haunts, qualifies, and ultimately defines her sense of true vocation. She discovers Beethoven’s Sonata Opus 31 No. 2 an inexplicable obsession, “one that held me from the moment it began….My whole being stirred and awoke to something that had remained unknown to me consciously till then,” though she admits to having known it “unconsciously” “in nature” (30-31). This prefigures her final move away from India to Austria towards the end of her life: “I was finding something far beyond the music as such; I was contacting the spirit speaking through sound, the spirit of Beethoven. Yes I had found him” (31).

The conventional trope of the East as the repository of the spiritual, as opposed to the material West, is inverted here as, despite her untrained ear, she caught in Beethoven “a sense of fearlessness, strength and purity passing, especially in the slow movements to those regions of the spirit which lift one into that which can only be felt but never spoken” (41). Beethoven dominated her consciousness and, though music would ultimately become a space of transcendence, even from history, it had its politically sensitizing aspects. World War I, which she saw as madness and dehumanizing rage, took a particularly poignant turn due to its implications in the world of music: “By cutting themselves off from everything connected with Germany, the English had reduced their concert halls to a monotonous mediocrity. I was thirsting for the real thing and felt that many others must be silently feeling the same way.” (48) This was one of her first moments of doubt about nations and nationalism. Ruing that “the English as a people – putting aside the Celtic elements of the island – are not very musical” and that “blind prejudices were still running high” (49), she perforce became a concert manager. Thus began her engagement with the world of work, born of twin compulsions: a pull towards Beethoven and a political consciousness that saw the dangers of exclusionary nationalism.

In doing so, she was marking her difference from the main currents of English life, opting instead for a broader, though still Western, and elite, sense of identity. This was analogous to her attitude to prayer which she performed “not in the orthodox way, but as the spirit moved me…. It could be Church of England, Roman Catholic or Greek Church. I was not concerned with the denomination, but only with the spirit”
But as she crossed denominational frontiers, she also left England for Europe, though “travelling abroad was still not easy at that time, and the crossing of frontiers was a great trial. But these things did not deter me, for there were two pilgrimages which only the war had prevented me do far from accomplishing. One was to Bonn and the other to Vienna… to the little house where Beethoven was born…” (51-52).

India Calling: Via Beethoven, Romain Rolland, Gandhi

Madeleine’s first move to India had been within the imperial frame as her father was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the East India Station. Her debut into Bombay society was as an “awkward and indignant” young woman ill at ease with being “dragged around the ballroom by young men I hardly knew and for whom I cared nothing…especially in that hot and perspiry climate” (Spirit’s Pilgrimage 33). At the Durbar celebrations to mark the visit of the King and Queen to India in 1911, she wrote: “India had meant nothing for me but a life of social functions and formalities in a very restricted society which did not appeal to me at all. The real India, which was to draw me to herself in the days to come, I had neither seen nor even sensed” (40).

Unlike in the quest left incomplete by Forster’s Adela Quested in A Passage to India, the “real India” would come to Mira via Gandhi. In a twist of ironic fate, it was her quest for Beethoven that took Madeleine to Gandhi, via Romain Rolland, whom she contacted in order to understand the musician. “He mentioned India, not with any suggestion that my travels should take me there but in connection with a small book he said he had just written…called Mahatma Gandhi. I looked blank.” Rolland’s summing up of Gandhi as “another Christ” struck her as “deep” but did not seem to hold “any special significance for me personally” (58). Eventually she bought in Paris “a small orange-colored book bearing the title Mahatma Gandhi” with which “the shop window was entirely filled” (59) and recorded her instant and intense epiphanic response:

Now I knew what that “something” was, the approach of which I had been feeling. I was to go to Mahatma Gandhi, who served the cause of oppressed India through fearless truth and non-violence, a cause which, though focused in India, was for the whole of humanity. I did not weigh
the pros and cons or try to reason why this was the outcome of my prayers. The call was absolute and that was all that mattered. I went back to London and reserved a berth in a P&O liner. I told my parents. They sensed the magnitude of my inspiration and did not argue with me. I soon realized however, that I was being altogether too hasty. I must put myself through severe training before I could hope to be accepted (60).

The quick shifts in the passage indicate the strengths and limitations of the texture of the future Mira’s engagement with Gandhi and India: an intense sense of a mysterious calling beyond reason, a powerful sense of personalities – Beethoven, Romain Rolland, Christ, Gandhi, and herself – and the material and emotional luxury, for a woman especially, of being able to afford to follow an “inspiration” of such “magnitude”, disregarding societal expectations and conventions. The grandeur of the decision, and the self-abnegation in her subsequent regime of “severe training” in order to be accepted as a worker by a reluctant Gandhi, are of a piece with a majestic sense of a self that must realize its destiny. It is a narrative of mystical individualism worked out within a complex web of history interpreted in terms of towering personalities, grand visions, and supra-mundane inspiration. The ‘conversion’ occurred not as a ‘political’ one, involving a rational understanding of structures of imperial power, but as a spiritual calling. She journeys into the world of politics as one chosen for a pilgrimage.

*Spinning a New Self: From Madeleine to Mira*

Having read in Rolland about Gandhi’s constructive programme, Madeleine set about learning the language of Gandhi – of khadi and swaraj – starting with a regime of spinning, sitting and sleeping on the floor, becoming a vegetarian teetotaler and taking lessons in Urdu. This self-propelled program of creating a new self was initiated prior to a direct encounter with Gandhi or any of his immediate associates. It was “The Kensington Weavers” from whom she acquired a spinning wheel, and it was the Permanent Under Secretary of State at the India Office, a friend of the family, who advised learning Urdu, even suggesting an Indian student in London as a tutor.
Subscription to *Young India* followed and it was in Paris that she “first read the *Bhagvadgita* and some of the *Rigveda* – both in French” (61).

Her first contact with Gandhi was via a letter she sent along with a sample of wool spun by herself and a “thanksgiving offering” of twenty pounds. Rewarded with a reply from Gandhi on 24 December, 1924, she sought his permission and set sail in October 1925, with spartan baggage, including the little jewelry she had inherited for “presentation to the Cause” (63):

…From the beginning no one had ever tried to dissuade me from my decision. They seemed to realize that it was a spiritual necessity and accepted it as inevitable… And it was not an easy thing for a man connected with the highest British officials to have a daughter go and join the archrevolutionary of the British Empire! (64)

She casts her first meeting with Gandhi at Sabarmati Ashram as a mystical awakening. Having “lost any sense of physical being” upon entering the ashram, she was greeted by “a slight brown figure”:

I was conscious of nothing but a sense of light. I fell on my knees. Hands gently raised me up and a voice said: “You shall be my daughter.” My consciousness of the physical world began to return, and I saw a face smiling at me with eyes full of love, blended with a gentle twinkle of amusement. Yes, this was Mahatma Gandhi, and I had arrived (66).

Her subsequent re-education, with lessons in Indian etiquette coming obliquely from Kasturba, learning that spinning cotton is more difficult than spinning wool, and being told by Gandhi that while she should not forget her Urdu, she should “make a start on Hindustani with the Devanagari script” (67). She notes her attachment to the person of Gandhi: “From early morning to the last thing at night I lived for the moments when I could set eyes on Bapu. To be in his presence was to be lifted out of oneself” (69). She then notes the resistance from him who “flatly refused to be looked upon as a Guru” (75).
The “self” that Madeleine wished to be lifted out of added to the “explosive material” that Sabarmati Ashram comprised, a “heterogeneous group” with varied temperaments, with Gandhi as the one who generally “sailed peacefully through the repeated disturbances” (71). Responding better to the “quietness of atmosphere, unity of endeavour, hard work, and spiritual purposefulness” at the Wardha Ashram as opposed to “that miniature cross-section of the everyday world” that was Sabarmati, though she appreciated the fact that “a laboratory for experimenting with theories for the betterment of the world must comprise such a cross-section and not a carefully chosen selection of unusual people” (75). This distinction, between the idea of the chosen few and the mixed multitude, is the complex dialectic that defined the contours of her political engagement. She represents her assimilation into the ashram as being smoother than it was, suppressing various differences that become apparent in her letters, though even here she edited severely (T. Weber 191).

Her ‘Western’ self surfaced repeatedly as she witnessed the “great national drama”:

I watched entranced. Here was a standard of life which made mixing and meeting and moving around so easy and simple—no stiffness and no botheration with the trappings and fetters of Western civilization.

The great leaders of that time…came and went with the gracious charm of Eastern culture. They sat on the floor with natural ease… (76).

Her joining the ashram had drawn attention in London with *The Sunday Chronicle* publishing in 1926 what Gandhi termed a “libel on Mira” (T. Weber, 195). She issued a clarification denying a change of religion, (“the religion that was lying dormant within me for the last 33 years has now revealed itself”) and stated that she “was not introduced to any radical brains” (195). These attacks continued with Gandhi clarifying in *Young India* in 1930 that the Ashram had not converted her but that he hoped that “she was a better Christian now than four years ago when she came to the Ashram” and that “Miss Slade bears not a Hindu name but an Indian name. And this was done at her instance and for convenience” (360).
Her attempts at acclimatization and acculturation included sartorial choices. Still wearing her white khadi dresses, and with Gandhi being “rather against my taking to Indian clothes”, she started wearing a sari and next had her hair cut off as a prelude to taking a vow of celibacy, the first being opposed by the other women Ashramites on the ground that it would “make her conspicuously different from other women and…bar natural association”. Her enthusiasm won the day and Gandhi agreed, cutting off her hair himself. She followed this up with a further change in attire, approved by Gandhi, to a khadi “full skirt called a ghagra and the short half sari for passing over the head…in the style of the village women…. the change gave me much more freedom of movement in work” (81). In 1926, Gandhi would describe her to ashram women as the “ideal woman worker among us” (T. Weber 197).

That the dress did ‘nativise’ her in the public eye was evident from an episode she relates in her autobiography. At Bombay’s Taj Mahal Hotel, the man on the other side of the counter spoke to her “in an offhand manner – after all the Taj was the white man’s preserve in those days and what right had a woman in a ghagra to be there?” while a white lady “drew in her skirts as she passed me as if fearing contamination” (86, 87). That Slade, with her greater than average European height and features, could disguise her race so well in rural Indian costume, speaks for the symbolic power of attire, a power that Gandhi’s own political life exemplified.

Madeleine vs. Mira: The Divided Self

However, Mira’s ‘Western’ self recalcitrantly asserted itself despite her devotion and finding her a vocation other than personal service to “Bapu” was a challenge. While she realised that “it was not easy for Bapu to think of a suitable place to send me”, she followed his suggestion that she go to the Arya Samaji Kanya Gurukul in Delhi, whose surroundings, however, she found “antipathetic to my nature and so markedly devoid of the aesthetic sense.” Her post facto analysis of that period is telling: “When I look back on that time I can see how I was progressively crushing my natural independence of nature and putting myself wholly under another’s will, a thing I had never done in my life. It was the intense reverential love that I felt for
Bapu which made me discipline myself in this way, but it increased the tension which was already there” (Spirit’s Pilgrimage 88).

The individualistic discourse of ‘innate nature’ and ‘aesthetic sense’ which the Ashram discipline reined in (realizing her extreme sensitivity to smell, Gandhi insisted she come with him on toilet inspections) reasserted itself and eroded her sense of well-being. Respite comes in the form of special concessions being made for her stay at the all-male Gurukul Kangri, an educational institution for boys that promised more peace and a view of the Himalayas. Though “separation from Bapu gnawed at my heart,” this was also her “first contact with Indian villagers” as she went to nearby villages to teach carding to the inhabitants (91).

But such moments of meaningful independent work were rare as her need for proximity to Gandhi remained, pushing him to advise her in a letter dated March 22, 1927, to “retain your individuality at all cost” and to “grow along your own lines”. Gandhi’s stated desire that she “be a perfect woman”, by which he implied that she “shed all angularities” and “practice detachment”, created a crisis of identity: “One moment I would feel a sense of lightheartedness at the idea of letting myself be myself, and the next would I realize that I must at all cost strive to overcome my shortcomings” (93). One of the many requirements that Gandhi had for her joining him on his tours was that she learn Hindi: “‘Hindi first, everything else after.’ It became a sort of nightmare” (95). Her tolerably good Hindi deemed her fit for work in villages, with Madhubani in Bihar the testing ground, with the All India Spinner’s Association’s work to promote khadi.

Closely attached to Gandhi at the Lahore Congress, watching from the margins as the Independence Resolution was passed, followed by the historic meeting of the Congress Working Committee at Sabarmati Ashram where Gandhi put forward his idea of a salt satyagraha, her duty being the ‘domestic’ one of arranging for his food and clothing and “supervising arrangements for tea and coffee” (109). Her sense of feeling ‘at home’ could only have been enhanced by the shared world of Western education and privilege that much of the Congress embodied. One recollection is telling: “I remember so well when Jawaharlal and his father, Pandit Motilal Nehru,
were leaving. How the old gentleman, as he bade me goodbye, quoted Shakespeare’s lines: “When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning or in rain?” (110)

Her politics were experienced via the private. Describing her “first experience of Bapu being in jail” she writes of it subjectively: “I had been prepared for it for a long time, yet when it came it was a strange feeling, and do what one would, it kept the mind and nerves on a particular strain. One longed to court arrest and go to jail to, but Bapu had forbidden my entering the Satyagraha at that time, just as he had prohibited Reginald” (112). The sharp divide along lines of national identity is evident. Reginald Reynolds, an English Quaker, whom she earlier describes as having “thoroughly imbibed the spirit of the times”, having been at the Lahore Congress and having been the chosen bearer of Gandhi’s letter of ultimatum to the Viceroy before the Dandi March, is bracketed out along with her (110). The struggle against the ‘self’ was not one-sided, as Gandhi wrote to her in on June 24, 1931:

You are on the brain. I look about me, and miss you….But what is the use? You have done the right thing. You have left your home, your people and all that people prize most, not to serve me personally but to serve the cause I stand for. All the time you were squandering your love on me personally, I felt guilty of misappropriation. And I exploded on the slightest pretext. Now that you are not with me my anger turns itself upon me for having given you all those terrible scoldings. But I was on a bed of hot ashes all the while I was accepting your service. You will truly serve me by joyously serving the cause (127).

On her subsequent trip to England with Gandhi for the Round Table Conference, during which her visible role was to take “charge of the domestic side” (Alexander 72) they took a detour via Switzerland to meet Romain Rolland. This episode marks yet another fissure in the apparently smooth surface of her assimilation into her role as Gandhi’s devoted disciple. The incident also sparks a species of amnesia in her autobiographical memory, the causes for which she retrospectively diagnoses as an inchoate sense of unease:

When I look back on those precious days, I find it very difficult to recall anything in detail. I must have been thoroughly exhausted by the
strain of the London visit, and another, and more fundamental, thing was the strange feeling which had been affecting me unconsciously in England also – a feeling of my coming back to the scenes of my former free and independent life, but now under conditions of strictest discipline. In order to maintain that discipline, I had, without realizing it, shut myself up in a self-imposed inner prison. It was when I met Romain Rolland again, and felt the influence of his penetrating blue eyes, I vaguely knew something was wrong – wrong in the sense that I was not my full self. My spirit silently longed to reach out to him, but I could not emerge from that inner prison. It seemed to be part of the tapasya which Fate had ordained for me, in answer to those prayers of long ago. So the days passed in a haze of inner sadness which I could not, at that time explain to myself (Spirit's Pilgrimage 146-7).

Freedom, as a public political “Cause”, clashed with an imprisoned subjective consciousness. Ironically, the prison was “self- imposed,” though of unclear origin. The spirit’s pilgrimage involved some paradoxical turns in its journey towards fulfillment. And categories such as ‘empire’ and ‘nation’ appear to be incidental details in the pursuit of its true calling, figured in transcendental terms.

In Romain Rolland’s account of this visit that he wrote to a friend in America, she was described as “Mira (Miss Slade), proud of figure and with the stately bearing of a Demeter” who chants in her “warm, grave voice” “a canticle of Rama and Sita” as part of evening prayer (147). The account dwells briefly on Beethoven:

On the last evening after the prayers, Gandhi asked me to play him a little of Beethoven. He does not know Beethoven, but he knows that Beethoven has been the intermediary between Mira and me, and consequently between Mira and himself, and that, in the final count, it is to Beethoven that the gratitude of us all must go…. He is very sensitive to the religious chants of this country, which somewhat resemble the most beautiful of our Gregorian melodies, and he has worked to assemble them (148).
In this attempt to connect East with West, Rolland shares with Mira a sense of being qualitatively different from “the hurricane of intruders, loiterers, and half-wits which his visit loosed on our two villas…” (149). In Rolland’s account above, “the common man” in Europe is treated with amused tolerance for his spiritual obtuseness and plain ignorance. Mira’s account of the working classes in England, Scotland, and America – countries she travels to after her prison stint in order to clear the “misrepresentation of Bapu” – was somewhat more romantic, contrasting the “immediate contact and sympathy with the [working class] audiences” with the “stiffness and stickiness of the Imperial City” of London (184-5). In describing the masses in India, she shifts between romanticizing the simple country folk to a Rolland-like sense of droll, distanced humour: her narrative’s intended readership projected as one that expects occasional touches of humour and the exotic. The source and font of her engagement with “the cause” of India is firmly located in that privileged space of proximity to the person of Gandhi, physically and spiritually. However, that sensibility was in a perennial state of heightened sensitivity to its own need for fulfillment, rendering her commitment tenuous each time her old ‘independent’ self asserts itself.

Prison, Passion, ‘Pashulok’: Possible Vocations

Apart from the work of khadi and Gandhi’s personal assistantship, Mira’s other major contribution was to be his emissary. Her one dedicated project was to be christened ‘Pashulok’, a shelter for animals, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas near Rishikesh, followed by other animal husbandry schemes. There was a remarkable flexibility in the social and political spaces within which she moved, where her difference and individuality were recognized and harnessed for the larger political cause. During a year-long stint in Arthur Road Prison, Bombay, prison in 1932, where she served a term for carrying on the work of collecting and disseminating information about anti-British activities, since Gandhi, Pyarelal and Mahadev had also been arrested, she is a sensitive recorder of how Gandhi reached across the class and gender divide:
Here were some of the leading ladies of Bombay. Practically all of the prisoners were used to good standards of living, and certainly higher than Ashram standards, but they had nearly all been given C-class…. They had mostly been arrested for picketing, which the women everywhere were carrying on with undaunted zeal. The way Bapu’s call to action had moved the women of India was one of the most astounding and baffling things with which the Government found itself faced (157).

Imprisoned with Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya and Sarojini Naidu, she refused the A class amenities granted them after Naidu’s transfer to Yeravda Prison since “Ashram life resembled much more the C-class standard” (161). She also undertook, guided by Gandhi, a reading program in the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata and Ramayana, which as he had suggested, she “balanced” by a reading of the Koran and Amir Ali’s Spirit of Islam (166). Like Elwin and Stokes, she attempted a synthesis of ‘East’ and ‘West’, finding in Hindu scriptures things that seemed to be part of my inmost self, part of something I had known long before and since lost…. an infinite inspiration… I heard the same note as in the music of Beethoven, and my heart stirred, and then hushed again as if waiting for a later time (170).

The story of Nala and Damayanti particularly moved her with “the conception of woman’s devotion to her beloved”, since her “idea of marriage had always been something very sacred” (170). The closest Mira came to marriage was with Prithvi Singh, a well-known Punjabi revolutionary, who had been absconding in connection with the Lahore Conspiracy Case, who came to Gandhi who pleaded for his release. The story of his adventurous life, including imprisonment in Andaman and a dashing “escape from a running train” was given to her to polish and “rejoic[ing] in his frank and fearless manner” she felt that “here at last” was someone with whom she could perhaps “work outside independently, as Bapu always wanted me to do” (216). At Gandhi’s suggestion that they marry if that is how she felt, she felt “extraordinarily happy” as her “emotions ran riot”. Fate was “tossing her around like a little cork in a
rough sea” but “Prithvi Singh wisely resisted all proposals whether from Bapu or others,” ending Mira’s brief brush with the possibility of her (committed as she was to a spiritual marriage to Gandhi like the Mira of legend) fulfilling the Damayanti/Sita ideal of conjugal fidelity (217). This was despite Gandhi seeing it as his duty to plead her case with Prithvi Singh in 1940 (T. Weber 209). The autobiography is silent on the subsequent conflict between Gandhi and herself on Prithvi Singh’s politics, which he communicated in a 1944 letter: “It is generally believed that the Communist Party is exploiting you though him” (211).

A growing sense of discontentment, as khadi was “not a natural outlet” for her being “an indoor kind of occupation” and animal husbandry, the work “most congenial” to her, not being available to her in the form of “definite work”, she was beset by “inner misery and outer aimlessness”, and Gandhi sent her to Dalhousie to recover, where she records meeting Subhash Bose, “then a young active Congressman” (209). Her “solitary rambles” resulted in an resurgence of “the old urge to do sketching” with “Bapu sens[ing] the inner need I had for self-expression of that kind”, brought to the surface by the sublime moment of “being face to face with the great Himalayan mountains” (210). The language of Wordsworthian Romanticism and the artistic soul in need of fulfillment resurges, prefiguring the final retreat into the mountains, and then ultimately, back to Vienna in pursuit of the spirit of Beethoven.

‘Pashulok’, or world of animals, was the “poetic” (in Gandhi’s approving words) name she gave her final Himalayan retreat, set up in collaboration with the Government, as part of its “cattle scheme” (277). But before that, urgent personal and the political imperatives took over. She records, one again, her sense of “painful restless[ness]” and “terrible anguish,” which makes her “take silence and devote myself entirely to meditation and prayer, till God gave me light.” Deciding to “spin 1,000 yards of yarn daily” so that “the mind would work in a healthy way”, Gandhi suggested she go to Palampur, to Lala Kanhaialal’s estate, where she settled down to a long period of silence, spinning and reading the Rig Veda which “harmonized exactly with the glory of the elements with whom I was day and night in silent, solitary and direct contact” (219, 221).
Historical events such as the Japanese advance through Burma and the Cripps Mission, brought her out of a fifteen-month silent retreat in January 1942. Responding to various duties such as at a women’s camp in Navasari, North of Bombay, she also offered in a long letter to Gandhi to the Congress Working Committee and the All-India Congress Committee to be held at Allahabad and “plead behind the scenes” with the leaders for the organization of nation-wide nonviolent resistance to the approaching Japanese invasion. Gandhi asked her to read a text and carry it to Allahabad “if it appealed to me”, indicating his faith in her political judgment (227).

The two pieces of typed paper, an early version of the now famous “Quit India” Resolution, carried her into the charged center of activity at Anand Bhavan, to be followed by a stint in Orissa where Gandhi sent her “to prepare the masses for nonviolent non-cooperative resistance to the expected Japanese invasion of the east coast” (230). Her approach towards the issue was “straight, unequivocal and courageous”, in Gandhi’s words, (letter May 5, 1942, Spirit’s Pilgrimage 233). This, in response to her report that she negotiated with the Chief Secretary, explaining to him how, after the soon to be inevitable retreat of British Raj “a free, peace-loving India” would be more in English interests than “an India in the hands of a militant Japan,” and hence “you should cooperate with us in the present situation, and in the method of your withdrawal” (232). Subsequently, she was sent to Delhi to represent to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, “in a more personal way, Bapu’s meaning behind the [Quit India] resolution” (235). Her meeting with the Viceroy’s Private Secretary stresses her insider status, as she offers “to take him by the hand ….to the places where I spent my life” so that he is less “out of touch with the masses” (236). It is a continuation of her earlier efforts such as the journey to England and the United States in 1932, where she had been able to meet with statesmen such as Lord Halifax, General Smuts, Sir Samuel Hoare and Winston Churchill, as easily as she had communicated with the working classes. Her ability to traverse these class and geographical divides, no doubt a function of her birth as much as her subsequent self-fashioning, help her in such acts of mediation between East and West. However, it is not clear how successful Mira/Madeleine’s attempts to be political deputy to the Mahatma were.
After another period of detention at the Aga Khan’s Poona Palace, she conceived of “starting a little center of my own” refusing Gandhi’s idea of having trustees, since they “would ruin my freedom of expression, which was what I was really seeking, though I had not analyzed it to myself in so many words” (259). Once again, autobiographical hindsight steps in to render a previously inchoate experience intelligible. What the autobiographical silence hides is the tension with Gandhi, with him going so far as to write in June 1944 that he would “let the public know …that I am not at the back of any of your activities which are being undertaken inspite of my disapproval” (T. Weber 211). The rift was healed with Gandhi apologizing within a month for “causing dear ones grief when it is avoidable” (213).

At Kisan Ashram, “the busy, balanced rural life” reinforcing in her mind the “significance of Bapu’s economics” which made villagers “masters of their fundamental needs” (Spirit’s Pilgrimage 269), she also “kept an eye open on the world scene, which was rapidly developing” (264). She was also appointed Honorary Special Advisor to the U.P. Government’s “Grow More Food” campaign. She was at Pashulok, in Rishikesh when the transfer of power on August 15 happened, with her deciding to stay in the mountains “until the celebrations were over, for one did not feel like rejoicing in the prevailing atmosphere” (284). With Gandhi refusing her permission, owing to her ill health, to go work at the Kisan Ashram to help restore communal harmony in the wake of Hindu-Muslim riots, she reverted to her role as reporter, catching Gandhi’s perhaps most pained moments in India’s moment of freedom. “‘I don’t know what you think of this freedom,’ I heard him say one day to someone, ‘for me it is a disillusionment,’…. He carried on with his untiring work of healing, but the zest had gone out of his life” (289). Her comment on Gandhi’s assassination suggests equanimity: “I looked up into the heavens and, through the boughs of the trees, the stars were shining in peaceful splendour far, far away. They told of Bapu’s spirit released and at peace, and as I gazed on them it was as if Bapu was there – yes, and there and with me too. It all became one” (292).
After Gandhi, in Independence: the Himalayan Sojourn

This peaceful reconciliation of life and death, self and other, finds an ecumenical analogy in her reversion to Christian metaphor: “the long-drawn-out crucifixion of Bapu’s spirit was over, completed and consummated in the crucifixion of the flesh…. My mind went back to the Crucifix in the Vatican at Rome. Yes–Bapu knew that was the gateway to the thing he was seeking” (293). That Crucifix was the one Gandhi had stood silently before on their visit to the Vatican, after the Round Table Conference, deeply moved by that one artifact alone. While this evidences Gandhi’s own spirit of openness to all faiths, a degree of clarity and closure come with seeing his passing in terms of her own personal growth: “Tempting as it would have been to turn to Bapu in thought, and seeking him and asking him to help and guide, something within me peremptorily forbade any such thing. ‘Bapu must be left in perfect peace, and you must stand on your legs.’ From the very first hour this feeling possessed me” (294).

Surviving the umbilical disconnect, Mira’s last years in India were confined to Pashulok, which she built further with the aid of various assistants, among them, a young ascetic from Rishikesh, Swami Yoganand, and a Brahmachariji, who embodied the spirit of self-search in age-old traditions of itineracy. “A simple villager by birth, he had run away from home as a young boy in order to study Sanskrit, and later had wandered over all the Himalayan pilgrim routes…[and] looked exactly as if he had stepped out of a painting of the Apostles” (304). Again, her disillusionment with humanity at large especially the post-independence Indian drive for modernizing left her in “deep existential doubt” (T. Weber 216). She started a short lived monthly paper “all on my own” called Bapu Raj Patrika, a self-confessedly “fantastic venture” to propagate “a simple decentralized society”, and not content with writing, toured the villages in winter on horseback, convinced that “the Congress was not in real touch with the peasantry, and that the growing corruption of the bureaucracy was eating into the vitals of the nation.” But, she adds, with disarming candour, “other things also were brought home to me, especially the impracticability of my efforts, and the dangers into which I could fall” since she could not agree to “the frontal approach” of dislodging the Government put forth by the other “friends” who wanted to join her in
her “campaign” (306-7). The bhoomdan movement of Vinoba Bhave that inspired Sarala Devi did not touch her as she “was not drawn towards it” (308).

Her last years in India in Kashmir, blending the personal with the “constructive programme,” made her set up another animal husbandry unit with the help of the State Government, her association with it lasting three years, until differences between various agencies make her declare return to Tehri Garhwal. With “no place in which to live, and very little money left,” she records how the various projects – Kisan Ashram, Pashulok, Gopal Ashram and Gaobal – “all passed out of my life like dreams” (313). Ten years after Gandhi’s passing, described as a “kind of hibernation” for the “inner being”, she received a parcel from Paris containing a book by Romain Rolland.

Her autobiographical impulse was fired at this time: “without quite knowing how it had come about… I had begun writing my life’s recollections.” Now, moments of existential angst followed: “Who am I, where am I? To what had my life led?” Her “blinding melancholy” saw some respite when she found a piece of land on which she builds a cottage (315). However, a chance rediscovery of a biography of Beethoven by Rolland, is epiphanic as she emerges minus “the former tension and restlessness” and launches on the “third and last chapter of this present birth…. Not a finishing, but a preparation” (315).

As it turned out, Mira returned to “the glorious forests above Baden near Vienna, which breathe the spirit of him whose immortal music they inspired,” achieving “a synthesis, the richness of which is neither describable in a few lines nor knowable in a short space of time.” It is in this perspective that she wishes her life’s journey, into India and out of it, to be seen.

Mira’s life defined a spiral rather than a circle – she returned to Europe, not to England – and though carried out in the crucible of history, her life story is figured in terms of a mystical quest motif. Sarala Devi, whose autobiography was written in Hindi and published locally, stayed on in India, having ‘gone native’ to the extent of choosing cremation as her last rites by preference. Mira’s return to Europe and “the Spirit”, on the other hand, signals a spiritualism that embraced politics but only in so
far as it met with a deeply felt personal need. The personal, in the form of the spirit and its irresistible urges, defined her, even in her acts of transcendence.

**Part II: Sarala Devi and ‘Constructive Work’: Deconstructing the Self and the Nation-state**

Sarala Devi’s quest for her destiny, from Catherine Mary Heilemann to Sarala Devi, criss-crosses with that of India’s where she arrived from England in 1932 and stayed till her death in 1982. In this span, her affiliation with a particular set of ideologies and methods resulted in her being an institution-builder who is remembered today for her extraordinary personal trajectory, and her solid contribution to Gandhi’s ‘constructive work’ programme, especially in the area of education which she implemented successfully via the institution she built by the name of Laxmi Ashram, and by her holistic activism in the field of women’s empowerment and environmental protection. In fact, so identified is she with her work, as educationist and environmental worker, and with the larger public context for it, that it becomes difficult to locate Sarala the individual in her own autobiography. That she wrote it in Hindi testifies to an altogether deeper level of immersion in India, and sets her apart from all other Western disciples of Gandhi.

Published in 1960, Sarala Devi’s autobiography, *Vyavaharik Vedanta: Ek Atmakatha* (Practical Vedanta: An Autobiography) at one level suffers from a fundamental identity crisis: it was not named by its author, the name having been chosen posthumously by one of her close associates. To compound the distancing of the book from its author, the Preface begins with a negative assertion: *[Mein lekhika nahin hoon]*...“I am not a writer. Therefore, I do not easily sit down to scribble on a blank sheet.” Both these facts point to a somewhat reluctant autobiographer who embarks on the project with hesitation ("sankoch ke saath") and requests that her book “should not be considered an autobiography” (1). Though the term ‘vyavaharik vedanta’ stood for all she had imbibed from her contact with Gandhi, she shrinks from the autobiographical enterprise, she says, since it is a genre that makes manifest “an inner life” ("antaratma ki baaten") while her autobiography is “outward-looking,” and her attempt is to “present personal experience in the context of
everyday or shared circumstances” (1). She sets about delineating the political philosophy of Gandhi, touching on the Vedantic idea suggested by the term that forms the first half of her title: the interconnectedness of all life: the merging of the political, the philosophical, and the spiritual. She declares quite categorically that political problems can only be solved at the spiritual level, that the political and the rational are insufficient spaces and that the spiritual is the only truly scientific path. Till such time as science does not accept guidance from the spiritual plane, it shall fail in its duty. The destiny of science, according to her, lies in spirituality (3-4).

We don’t hear much of ‘conventional’ spiritualism after this, marking a sharp contrast to Mira’s account. Sarala’s narrative is an engagingly factual account of her involvement with her milieu, first as a developing political and social consciousness, and then as an activist immersed in the details of her chosen vocation. Her writing and other accounts corroborate this self-perception: an activist who wishes to produce a public document, a ‘plain-spoken’ history of the movements and events that were taking place in the middle decades of the 20th century as this English woman made her way across an India searching for its destiny, first as a nation fighting a colonial master, and then facing the challenges that colonialism and older systems of repression had laid in its path. After quickly disposing of the early years of her life in England, and only in their capacity as formative factors, she moves on to delineate the currents that engage her attention in the present context, the life of India, and of others engaged in the constructive programmes that Gandhian thought and action had inaugurated decades earlier.

Three major themes become evident as significant concerns in her life narrative, the intentional thrust of which is overriding pedagogic. Her autobiography is to be read neither as “entertainment,” nor as “a personal history”, and least as “self-advertisement” (this self-abnegation is reinforced by the explanatory preface that declares her reluctance to write this text, and the insistence of close friends and associates (the two were almost entirely overlapping categories in her extraordinarily vocation-driven life) that made her write for the benefit of future generations. After the initial chapters tracing the growth of a questioning mind and a rebellious sensibility, and the ultimate success in her enterprise of finding a location in which to
settle spiritually and socially, namely Gandhi’s India in the making, she launches into an account that is at least as much about other individuals as it is about her. Apart from events, the narrative weaves together an informal socio-ethnic account of the tribes and peoples who inhabit the remote hilly regions where she worked. In this, she shares with Rahula Sankrityayan an amateur ethnographic urge, without the personal and detailed engagement that Elwin brought to his account.

Sarala was an educationist, and that impulse determines the nature of the narrative she produces. We are to see a clear line of growth in awareness, the issues along which the growth is charted are issues that concerned her in her later life as a Gandhian social worker, and they determine what she highlights as being worthy of telling in her past. In this carefully selective first part, where her childhood and education are the concerns in chapters called by these simple descriptive titles, the language and style are direct, the episode told for its ultimate value as a lesson. Gandhi’s autobiography, which bears a close comparison with hers in this feature, engages us emotionally, by the details, and the emotional turmoil described with economy but with moving detail. Sarala Devi, however, places the bare facts rather than engage her readers in the kind of emotional vacillations that Gandhi dwells upon. Interiority is minimized. We are told what she thought and felt but we don’t visualize the scenario with the vividness that Gandhi compels. In an interview, her long time disciple Radha Bhatt pointed to her directness and underlined the aptness of her name ‘Sarala’. Unlike Mira’s flights of imagination and high emotive register, this narrative avoids rhetoric.

_Early Childhood: The First World War as a Formative Influence_

Sarala Devi was born Catherine Mary Heilemann to part-German parentage in England in 1901, eight years after Mira. Early formative experiences included the First World War. The accounts of Mira and Sarala overlap here in that they both register an early disillusionment with the reigning ideologies of the ‘West’. This is how she recounts the enormity of it in her quiet life of domestic quarrels and winning school scholarships:
[Phir vajrapat hua]…And then lightning struck. I have a faint memory of the wars of my childhood and recall the Portuguese Revolution. However, these events were well in the past, we had no direct encounter with them. But the events of 1914 drew us into their fold directly….We couldn’t understand what was going on. History had given me to understand that Britain and Germany had always been good friends. Almost like relatives, in a way. The royal families would often inter-marry…. Then this conflict was between governments, but the officials were safely settled in their capitals, while it was our people who were being killed. I could understand none of this, but whenever I spoke up, people laughed me off and sermonized that I need not worry about matters beyond my understanding. I admit that even at seventy-five, I fail to understand much in the field of national and international politics” (Vyavaharik 7).

As she speaks of the child’s clear perception of the unreason of war, predictably silenced by knowing adults, the adult writer draws a seamless continuum between that past self and the present one, indicating early to the reader that the life she has lived has allowed her to retain that early sense of truth and idealism, even as the world around her continues to engage in insanity justified as political common sense. But her narrative continues to relate explicitly how these early experiences taught her scepticism about institutions, governments and the law:

[Phir yeh jhagda aur paas aa gaya]… Then this conflict came closer. Some irregularities in my father’s birth certificate were discovered and he was put under house arrest as being of the enemy’s side. He had never even visited Germany. If he had any view on the matter, it was that of any ordinary Swiss regarding his powerful neighbour. And along with it, an opposition to Prussian Junker-ism. I therefore failed to understand why he had been put under house arrest as an ‘enemy’. ‘The law is an ass’: this was my first experience of this truth. My mind was in a state of revolt (7-8).

She finds that all her textbook knowledge of war and religion had no correlation to reality, while her German identity makes her vulnerable in a way that
Mira would never know. While historical novels written for the youth always depicted wars being fought beyond inhabited places to prevent civilian casualties, the Bible informed her that Christianity was above all about turning the other cheek. Astounded to find that instead of the expected condemnation of war from all quarters, German women and children were subject to physical attacks in England, and that priests in Church prayed for the victory of “our army”, the young Katherine revolted (8,9). The overwhelming desire “to tell the truth,” inspite of her grandmother’s fervent pleas for her not to risk their safety by doing so, and the obvious inconsistencies between the letter and practice of religion resulted in her taking a drastic step (8). Her logic was impeccable. If English priests were praying for their victory, surely their German counterparts would be similarly engaged, she reasoned, and visualised a helpless God unable to decide whom to favour: “I became sceptical about religious sermons and stopped going to church” (9). This uncompromising clarity of vision and action that led to her refusing to take Confirmation and participating in the Holy Communion would remain with her all her life.

Growing up German in an England full of World War I jingoism was a decisive aspect of her identity formation. Resisting the idea of the nation was the final effect of this childhood experience. In contrast to Stokes, Elwin and Sorabji, her anti-racism and resolute pacifism, combined with a deep distrust of organized religion in its relation to nationalism, were the legacies of the war for Sarala. The international community that she came in contact with opened up her horizons, even as the ‘othering’ of the self by her racial ‘brothers’, the English, made her view them distantly. She mirrors here Gandhi’s contact with othering vis-a-vis race in South Africa as well as the later contact with ‘others’ with whom he felt affinities. Elective affinities which result in a new humanist universalism make them unwilling to settle for inherited parochialisms.

**Nature as Retreat and Rejuvenation**

In her telling of her childhood’s progress, Sarala evokes nature, and the rural, as spaces that offer her respites from the pain and disappointment of her encounter with the adult civilised world. In another echo of Mira’s account, for Sarala too
Nature offered a true space, free of the hypocrisies of her surroundings where there appeared to be a yawning gulf between speech and action. And she did just that. “Whenever the opportunity presented itself, I would get on my bicycle and leave for the woods of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire” (10). It was during this formative phase of her life, that the next significant event to shape her vocational future occurred. Seeing her interest and progress in languages, mathematics and history, she says, her teachers were confident that she would win a scholarship to a university. Then one day, the Principal summoned her to her office:

[\textit{Mere mishrit khoon ke karan ve mujh par shanka karti thin aur soachati thin ki main kattar rashtravadi nahin hoon...}] Because of my mixed blood she used to be suspicious of me and think that I was not a staunch nationalist...other teachers had empathy for me. The Principal said to me: “Listen Catherine! It has been decided that you cannot get the scholarship since you are of the enemy race [\textit{shatruvanshi}]. This is also appropriate since you do not contribute to the war effort, so you come out on top in comparison with students who are involved in the war effort.” I was stunned to hear this. Not because I wouldn't get the scholarship, but because of the reason I wouldn't get it. I began to wonder at the worth of people with such high education, who do not care for the difference between truth and falsehood and who do not mind hurting the feelings of their own children (10).

Many themes converge here: skepticism regarding the value of higher education, which allows for such prejudice and indifference to truth, the issue of race and nation as divisive ideas, and the educated adult’s callousness in wielding power to hurt not just young careers, but the greater damage done to young minds.

Sarala would later come into contact with Fabians and Quaker pacifists and Indian students in London through whom her interest in Indian and politics, and specifically Gandhi, was aroused, especially in “the miracle of Satyagraha” (\textit{Vyavaharik} 18). The Dandi March confirmed in her a desire to come to India to work in the constructive programme. She tried to meet Gandhi in London when he came for the Round Table Conference but failed, and again missed him at Ruskin College, Oxford. “It
was not yet time for me to meet Gandhiji,” she comments, though the personal element in her attraction to Gandhian ideology was remarkably minimal (22).

She also shows similarities with Stokes in her concern with begar, though unlike Stokes’ celebratory attitude towards his family, his desire to honour all the nations that had produced him, his desire to consciously trace the roots of his being in England, America and India reveal a desire for affiliation that seems noticeable by its absence in Sarala Devi’s case. There is no glorification of war, no need to talk highly of chivalry. She had read “historical novels meant for young people” but was quick to note the gap between literary representation and reality, especially in their depiction of war (8). Religion was a major concern for Stokes, who devoted a good deal of time to his treatise: Satyakama, or True Desire. Sarala’s autobiography, though it invokes the Vedanta tradition in its title makes no mention of any philosophical disquisitions. In fact the book reads like a summary of the historical events and movements connected with the freedom struggle, with Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave as its centers. She evinces no interest in the conventional orientalist tropes of Indian spiritualism. In fact, no ritual or icon could be associated with her. The only prayers that took place at Laxmi ashram were the inter-religious ones, in the tradition started by Gandhi at his Sevagram Ashram. She chose for herself the ‘ritual’ of cremation over burial in her desire to do as the locals do.

**Woman’s Work**

Independence as a streak revealed itself early in Sarala’s life. She rejected marriage though not for others and fought patriarchy in her own way (interview with Radha Bhatt, 2008). Her version of feminism was tied up with the nationalist/rejuvenating function of mothers and wives as saviours. She set up Lakshmi Ashram on her own initiative to put into practice Gandhi’s concept of Nayi Talim, a scheme for which Gandhi gave his approval, expressing his faith in her “vyavahaarik buddhi” or “practical wisdom” (203). It was an enterprise driven by a vision of re-interpretation of the terms “success and failure.”
Nationalism was thus being dealt with obliquely, as part of Gandhi’s Constructive Programme, a vision of the nation that focused on village uplift, the eradication of untouchability, and community level decision making. Lakshmi Ashram has a history of undoing caste by the simple practice of taking in girls from all castes, which met with some opposition initially. Balancing sensitivity to the cultural mores of the society within which they work – the workers and teachers are drawn from the hills and are often their own products – they have yet been able to effect a quiet revolution. As strong and respected women, the activist students of Lakshmi Ashram exude confidence and independence born of a life that is creatively engaged with the community. Interestingly, their ‘leaving home’ and continued activism after marriage (the ashram is careful not to project itself as anti-marriage, and takes pride in preparing girls to be ideal wives and mothers) has won hard-earned acceptance in the conservative culture of the hills. The ashram is not closed to outsiders and in fact has facilitated many inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, a model of nation-building the cuts across region, religion and caste by starting with the most private unit of society, the family. The Ashram redefines the nation of a family, by forging new collectivities but ones that do not overthrow all existing social institutions.

In 1975, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, Asharani Vohra quizzed Sarala Devi on the issue of feminism and women’s rights but met with reluctance on her part to engage with the issue. Vohra summarizes Sarala Devi’s brief response as follows: “there is no question of any Western style movement or equal rights here. But I ask, why do women want equal rights? For the same cheating, bribery, and corruption? For the same ‘great deeds’ [‘kaarnaamon’], crimes and wars? Then who will save the world from all this? (Vohra 83). Though in asserting the need for an alternate ‘feminine’ discourse here she seems to slip into an idealized view of women’s near-divine calling to rejuvenate society, in a taped interview available at the Gandhi Museum, she argues that women should not be worshipped, but treated as human beings, and speaks of “man and woman as two wheels, like two arms, legs, lungs...both of which must be equally strong.” However, in furthering Gandhi’s views, she argues that motherhood and family are the twin institutions on
which the foundations of this new ideal society are to be built and lay out the role that
women must play:

[**mahapurush kahan se aate hain?**] Where do great men/human beings
come from? From the love, forbearance, service and sacrifice of
mothers. The new society will be built by women. Filial love and the
expansion of the spirit of sacrifice for each other are the real hopes for
the future (Vohra 79).

Transplanted into the context of rugged hill women who were her target for
constructive work, these words take on an entirely different qualitative charge from
that carried by the Victorian trope of the Angel in the House. The physically strong
hillwomen who marched assertively through a conservative rural social environment
in their campaign for saving the environment or shutting down liquor shops,
reconfigured the meaning of traditional female strength. As Bill Aitken recalls his
early encounter with the women of Lakshmi Ashram in *The Nanda Devi Affair*:

It seemed funny that in Delhi self-important mountaineering
bureaucrats should spend vast amounts to try and get a woman on
Everest. By easy recourse to these Kumaoni village ladies, fully trained
in the art of tough survival and uncomplaining in the face of the
extremes of nature, the desire to fly flags over summits could have
been fulfilled at a fraction of the cost and by an innumerable bevy of
belles. When the Chinese scare galvanised the government into
creating a home guard for the hills it was found during rifle practice in
the villages that women proved to be the crack shots. This did not
surprise me in the least for their daily round was so harsh and muscle-
binding that most of them for all practical purposes were fully trained
Olympic athletes (31).

He also recalls Sarala as one who “disbelieved most strongly in … local
superstition” (34) indicating a selective appropriation of tradition. Like her, Lakshmi
Ashram struck a fascinating balance between traditional practices and progressive
citizen-making. Multi-religious prayers, the coming together of Indians from all
corners and the ready acceptance of those of foreign origin as members of the ashram
community, with varying languages, arts, crafts and other social practices jostling against each other made for a unique rooted cosmopolitanism in the atmosphere.

While Sarala represents a stance of anti-imperialism, she also comes across as anti-government and even ‘anti-national’ in so far as these are systems of systems of oppression and hate-mongering. Recasting the language of political work in a way that uses the democratic idiom but blends it with the spiritual, she pits conventional “political methods” which depend on the recognition of the power of the “law and bureaucracy”, against “lokshakti” (people’s power) and “karuna ka marg” (the path of compassion) (Vyavaharik 263). The legal discourse is side-stepped and statist power is rejected in a deep questioning of the logic of patriarchy and its connections with social and political corruption. While there is a Gandhian displacement of the state as the legitimator of ‘right’, she carries it forward into the post-independence scenario of commercially viable but environmentally disastrous forest policies and the nexus between postcolonial state and vested power. However, echoing Vinoba’s contention that “isms” divide, she argues for “samyayog” as against “samyavad”. While the former indicates a coming together, the latter is destructive (224). Vinoba’s psychological understanding of revolution informs her vision as well: revolution is a spiritual matter and while the “red revolution” has been based on envy, in India, revolution must come from compassion (226).

However, she had a shrewd sense of the politics of capitalism and evolved innovative ways of teaching lessons against it. She recalls one such incident from the ashram, where a student who was a “trader’s daughter” did not share her food with the others the way that “children of a farmer” would do “naturally”. Her Gandhian approach to correcting this was to explain the difference between “sharing” and “hoarding” as the fundamental difference between “socialism” and “capitalism”. Here she uses the term “socialism” (“samyavada”) quite unironically, even going on to celebrate the fact that the students educated under the Gandhian educational programme could define and recognize capitalism in a way that more senior students taught under the government scheme did not (231).
Her ironic distance from big impressive sounding projects, even those that were initiated by comrades, and her conscious choice of the small-scale, co-existed with a nation-wide vision behind the movement for voluntary giving of land called bhoodan. In fact, so keen was she to join this movement that she was disappointed when Vinoba, who had asked all ashrams to shut down so that all could participate in this project, asked her not to shut down Lakshmi Ashram. Citing its unique status as “the only institution” that represented “stree shakti” (women’s empowerment) in India at the time, he urged her to continue with this local project (278). It was thus that Sarala’s locations were negotiated. Between Laxmi Ashram at Kausani and Him Darshan Kutir, Dharamghar, Pithoragarh, the last years of her life saw a re-location. For the rest, home was for her where work was and she though she travelled widely, within India, her autobiography does not suggest Mira’s restless wandering. She never left India once, thinking of leaving only once when the government denied her permission to cross the Inner Line and some restrictions were put on her movements in certain parts of Uttarakhand, which were subsequently lifted (393, 408). Intensely local yet global, she evoked amongst followers the ideal of “vasudhaiv kutumbakam” (Trivedi and Radha Behen 194).

In her autobiography Sarala takes no position on the language issue, putting forth Vinoba’s position insisting on a non-violent solution to the problem. Neither English nor Hindi should be imposed on anyone, but there is no further constructive engagement with the technicalities of the issue (262). Unlike Elwin, Stokes, and Mira the other figures in this study who went ‘native,’ and indeed unlike any of his other Western disciples, Sarala Devi stands out for having written her autobiography in Hindi. The symbolic value of this cannot be overstated; for her it indicated her complete immersion in swadeshi. As his deputy in Gandhi’s “Constructive Programme,” a multi-pronged approach to social work that Gandhi posited as essential to the task of India’s social rejuvenation, her implementation of the educational programme along the lines of ‘Nayi Talim’ took her to the hills of Kumaon. Promotion of the mother tongue, and rashtrabhasha Hindi along with it, was part of that educational mission. She internalised it so well that she went out of her way to shun English at her school. Here she is participating not by polemics but
by simple action in a heated debate in which Sankrityayan played a part as well, though not Stokes, who though he learnt Hindi, wrote in English.

Sarala Devi’s constituency was Indian, and local pahari at that, and Bill Aitken recalls that she scoffed at self-important visitors “from Delhi” (Trivedi and Radha Behen 204). Unlike Mira, she had the ability to subsume herself in her vocation and and assimilate herself into the hill culture and life-style. Her own assimilation was indicated by reminiscences by associates to the effect that she had simply forgotten her English name (194). Intensely local yet global in the reach of environmental concern, she was focused on detail, with a deep sense of location. In her case, vocation thus emerged as a sense of place, rather than person worship, as in the case of Mira. In fact she consciously distanced herself form the kind of blind worship that Gandhi often evoked, seeing him as “a human being” who was thus fallible (Gandhi Museum tapes). Further, unlike Stokes’ theoretical sweep and sometimes verbose idealism reflected in his tracts and letters, her oeuvre comprises diverse writings such as letters to ashram girls, to her father, and to colleagues in the environmental movement, always written in accessible style.

The Gandhian revolution with language characterizes Sarla Devi’s Vyavaharik Vedanta: Ek Atmakatha, a text that invokes in the title itself the advaitic ideal, qualified by vyavaharik, setting up in effect an oxymoronic relationship. Reflecting a debt to earlier 19th century traditions of reform and the spirit of Gandhian pragmatism, the word “vyavaharik” indicates the range of reference to be expected from this autobiography. The private-public divide is being reconceptualized here in terms not of the conventional understanding of private life as indicating interpersonal relationships vs. the public, but of a deeper sense of interiority signified by antaratma (which is not the concern of the book) in favour of a public spirited attempt to share with the reader what she has learnt in her contact with the likes of M. K. Gandhi and Vinob Bhave. The focus is on redefining an available vocabulary in terms of the demands of nation-building, of relating a history larger than the author’s, of moulding lives. The word atman is used, but neither as world-renouncing abstraction nor as self-regarding arrogance (aham). The same principle guides her redefinition of the binary of science and spiritualism. She claims early in her autobiography that advaita is the
only true science since in asserting the unity of all that exists, it brings us closest to living in a rational, non-exploitative relationship with the environment, exemplified by the ideal of village self-rule or “gram swarajya” (4). It thus offers a truer, more sustainable blueprint for humans’ relation to each other and the world. It is thus that she seeks to render Vedanta practical (vyavharik), the spiritual scientific: “the spiritual path is the only scientific path. Science must accept the guidance of spirituality, or it will be unable to fulfill its entire duty” (4).

Thus, while Gandhi undoes binaries of private and public even as he invokes them, Sarala Devi invokes the discourses of spirituality and science to undo the standard formulations. That both do so via texts that are also autobiographies, though understood somewhat differently, and that both emerge from India at a particular juncture in its formative history, opens up the issues of politics of location in fascinating ways. For while Gandhi displays evidence of his Western education and training in many of the creative ways he rethinks his past, Sarala Devi, in quite an opposite move, submerges her European identity into an adopted Indian one. The journey from Catherine Mary Heilemann to Sarala Devi, and from Vedanta to Vyavaharik, is co-terminus with the journey from England to India, from English to Hindi, and from the city to the village. Her life and career display the capacity for the Indian public domain at the beginning of the 20th century to accommodate diverse voices, a domain in turn defined by her presence and of other travelers like her. In this process of exchange, at this particular juncture, a process that has Gandhi presiding as a kind of high priest, the autobiographical form emerges as a key narrative resource.