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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ISSN 2198-9729 ISSN 2198-9737 (electronic)
Ecology and Ethics
ISBN 978-3-030-95430-7 ISBN 978-3-030-95431-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95431-4

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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.

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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
Krur 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.

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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a journey that began some two decades back, when my fascination for the Himalayas and my interest in Gandhian philosophy brought me in close contact with the Sarvodaya social activists of Uttarakhand. This work would not have been possible without the contribution and support of the many Sarvodaya workers of Uttarakhand I met and befriended ever since, as well as friends and acquaintances of Mira Behn and Sarala Behn interviewed in India and Europe, who appear countless times throughout this book, who generously shared their home and hearth, their time and their cherished memories of these women, illuminating my understanding, initiating me to the rich history of social activism in Uttarakhand Himalaya and beyond, and thus helping bring this story alive. Unfortunately, being of an advanced age, many of these remarkable people I came to know no longer remain. My tribute to those who passed away: Rameshwar Datt, Man Singh Rawat, Pratap Shikhar, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Edmund Carr-Saunders, and Elizabeth Henderson.

I am indebted to the support, inspiration, and guidance I received from my teachers and mentors, especially, Sarah E. Fredericks, who was my dissertation advisor, for her extremely detailed and generous constructive criticism, perceptive editorial advice, and sympathetic support at times of stress, which helped me grow as a scholar ever since. I am equally indebted to George A. James for his significant contribution to the process of my writing at initial stages, giving helpful feedback and editorial suggestions, and for his unremitting confidence in my scholarly abilities. I also owe my gratitude to Jayanta Bandyopadhyay for drawing my attention to the "gap in knowledge" present in the works of Mira Behn and Sarala Behn and for offering critical insights at the formative stages of this work. I am grateful to George A. James, Eugene Hargrove, and Ricardo Rozzi who first suggested to me the idea for a book project. Thanks to Rozzi for approaching me for the same, for his faith in my abilities, and steadfastness in standing behind the project, even though it took many more years than expected. My special gratitude also goes to Roy May, for his expert editing and help with preparing the index, for responding to my never-ending questions about formatting and technical editions, and for pushing this project to fruition. I would also like to acknowledge Francisca Massardo for her valuable

revision of the final manuscript. Kelli Moses provided invaluable support for the completion of the editorial work. Her work as well as Rozzi and Massardo's editorial work in the final preparation of this Volume 4 in the series Ecology and Ethics was supported by the Chilean National Agency for Research and Development's (ANID-Chile) project for Technological Centers of Excellence with Basal Financing to the Cape Horn International Center (CHIC-FB210018). I am also deeply appreciative of Rajmohan Gandhi's foreword to this book and his very warm endorsements.

Thanks are due to the scholars working in Gandhian studies: Rebecca Klenk of the University of Tennessee, who sadly passed away in 2020; Christopher Key Chapple of Loyola Marymount University; Sharon MacDonald of the University of New Brunswick, Thomas Weber of La Trobe University; Dennis Dalton of Bernard College, Columbia; Gita-Dharampal-Frick of the University of Heildelberg, Germany; Ramachandra Guha of Krea University, Andhra Pradesh; Mark Lindley of the University of Hyderabad; and Sita Kapadia, emeritus professor of English at CUNY, who shared their work and insights about the women in this study and made several interesting literature suggestions. My sincere debt to Beethoven scholars Rita Steblin, pianist and musicians Paul and Eva Badura-Skoda, and Harald Ossberger of Vienna, for their various inputs and suggestions for reading.

I am thankful to Clare Palmer at the Texas A&M University, who read and critiqued the manuscript in its early stages. I am also deeply indebted to Thomas Weber for his detailed and helpful comments on the manuscript in its very early drafts and who has long encouraged me in this project. Dennis Dalton, Sita Kapadia, John Leech, and Yogesh C. Bahuguna also read parts of this book and enlightened me with their various ideas and comments. Special thanks to Lucas Waggoner who meticulously read the entire manuscript and for his many helpful edits. My debt of gratitude also goes to anonymous reviewers of this project.

I am particularly grateful to David Hopkins, Dhoom Singh Negi, Jagadish Prasad Unniyal, Man Singh and Shashi Prabha Rawat, Radha Bhatt, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sadan Mishra, Shobha Vidyarthi, Sunderlal and Vimla Bahuguna, and Yogesh C. Bahuguna from India; Petra Kreuzer, Ana Wirgler, Constanza Aichinger, and Peter Coreth from Austria; Clare Carr-Saunders, John and Loretta Leech, John and Louise Davidson, Roger Newman Turner, and Charles Blackmore from the United Kingdom; and Peter Ruhe from Germany who were very generous in sharing several rare published and unpublished articles, manuscripts, contacts, and photographs and for giving me permission to print some of these photos. My gratitude also goes to the archivists and librarians who helped me find the papers and documents and for their expert research help during my fieldwork in India, England, and Austria. Chief among these are Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, the National Archives (Delhi); Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH); The National Gandhi Museum and Library; Gandhi Smarak Nidhi; Himalaya Seva Sangh; Gandhi Peace Foundation; Shivananda Ashram, Rishikesh; University of North Texas Library; British Council Library; London School of Economics Library; The National Archives (Richmond); Friends House Library; Howard University Library; University of Pennsylvania Library; and University of Washington Library. A huge thanks to the timely intervention of Gopal Krishna

Gandhi for kindly granting access to blocked papers at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi to me and to all researchers in future.

A major part of the writing of this book was done living in a Thoreau-style cabin overlooking the snow-clad peaks in the remote Himalayas, very close to where Mira Behn lived in the late 1950s. I owe my deepest gratitude to Yogesh C. Bahuguna for arranging this peaceful haven for me to sit, contemplate, and write. My recent relocation to Washington has also been very helpful: the natural beauty of the Cascades, the thriving intellectual atmosphere of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences (SIAS), friendly and helpful colleagues, and enthusiastic students of my classes, all stimulated my mind and helped me further shape and improve the draft overtime. Support and encouragement from SIAS to give talks on my research on various occasions; participation at the launch of the Mira Behn Archive (which I have been privileged to help create along with the help of my friends in Austria and England) in the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies at the University of Vienna; and giving interviews for Austrian Radio provided a global platform for extended research and writing that helped this project evolve.

My close friends have always been a great support encouraging me to complete this work, especially at challenging times. My heartfelt appreciation to friends in Austria, Canada, England, the United States, and India: Petra and Florentina Kreuzer, Livia Calice, Elizabeth al-Himrani, Jakob Urban, Peter Panning, Steven Duff, Clare Carr-Saunders, Sharon MacDonald, Magi Abdul-Masih, Seth Thompson, Adam Wietzenfeld, Charles Dailey, Alexandria Poole, Sarah Conrad, Shan Gao, Shane Epting, Nathan Bell, Kelli Barr, Keith Brown, Joey Tuminello, Nancy Ellis, Debashish Bhattacharya, and Nibedita Pal, who in various ways lit the way forward. Elizabeth and Florentina deserve special gratitude for help in interpreting during interviews in Vienna and for their translations and summaries of articles on Mira Behn from German to English. Special thoughts of gratitude go out to Seth, Steven, and Petra, for their intellectual stimulation and unstinting moral support and encouragement at early stages of my writing. My discussions on aesthetics with Seth were an additional rewarding experience in this regard. I am also thankful to longtime family friend Kalyan Chunder Dutt, emeritus professor at Scottish Church College in Kolkata, from whom I learned the value of "euphony" in writing (not that I have mastered it yet) and for the endless conversations we had on literature, history, and philosophy.

Spiritual counsel and guidance at times of stress came from various corners of the world, for which I am ever thankful: Achyut Chetan Maharaj of Sadhan Sangh Ashram, Rishikesh, India; Vimal Bahuguna of Silence of the Souls, Ranichauri, India; Rev. Donald K. Johnson and Rev. Canon Jimmye Kimmey of St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Denton; and Rev. Martin Yabroff of St. Andrews Episcopal Church, Tacoma. However, my utmost tribute goes to that friend and comforter in affliction, Beethoven, whose music gave me (as it has given many others) the much-needed spiritual solace that comes with courage, motivation, and determination to persevere.

My fellow traveler and comrade, David Grimes, encouraged me through the ups and downs of writing with his tireless editorial comments on several drafts of this

book, his companionship, and enduring optimism that I *could* finish this book, neutralizing my many negative flare-offs. The moral support of my aunt Joyoti Sinha and uncle Rabindra Sinha, especially during difficult times, has meant a great deal to me and I am thankful to them. Thanks also to my sister, Vaishali Mallik, for being there for me. Finally, I wish to express my deepest thanks to my father, Birendranath Mallik, who instilled in me a love for the mountains, and especially to my mother, Bharati Mallik, who, despite all troubles of her life, sustained me from afar with her love, helping me stay focused on my goals in life. Above all, my beloved grandparents Kalidas De (1915–2003) and Neela De (1925–2006), who were researchers, philosophers, and historians, who first kindled the intellectual light in me, initiated me to Gandhi's thoughts and philosophy, and to whom I dedicate this work, guided me in this journey with silent beacons from "the beyond."

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.

Contents

Chapter 1
General Introduction: Becoming Weavers: Worldviews, Society, and Ecology

The scholars are everywhere believers,
But never succeed in being weavers.
He who would study organic existence,
First drives out the soul with rigid persistence;
Then the parts in his hand he may hold and class,
But the spiritual link is lost, alas!

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One*

If a man is to be judged by his deeds … then the lives of co-workers will be the best judgment on me.

– Gandhi to Mira Behn, *April 29, 1927*

1.1 Mira Behn, Sarala Behn, and "Gandhi's Ghost"

Twenty-five years after the death of Mohandas K. Gandhi, in 1973 there emerged in the forests of the Western Himalayas in India a movement to save trees from commercial exploitation by hugging them. "Gandhi's ghost saves the Himalayan trees" exclaimed some at the movement's remarkable success in stopping commercial logging (Agarwal 1975, 386). This was the famous Chipko Movement, and the word *chipko* means "to hug." Scholars identify the Chipko as the beginning of the direct application of Gandhi's philosophy and practice for social and environmental justice in India (Guha 1989, 1998; Weber 1988). While movements like the Chipko in which women, in particular, came forth as powerful agents of social transformation whetted worldwide curiosity invoking much academic interest and debate on the nature of its discourse, there exists little scholarly work to understand why such an important mobilization of women and men for environmental protection should occur in the relatively small region of the Indian Himalaya (Garhwal and Kumaon), presently the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand (see Fig. 1.1)—to say, of course, nothing of the "ghost" of Gandhi suddenly inspiring poor people to save, of all things, the environment, a quarter of a century after his death.

B. Mallik, *Legends in Gandhian Social Activism: Mira Behn and Sarala Behn*, Ecology and Ethics, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95431-4_1

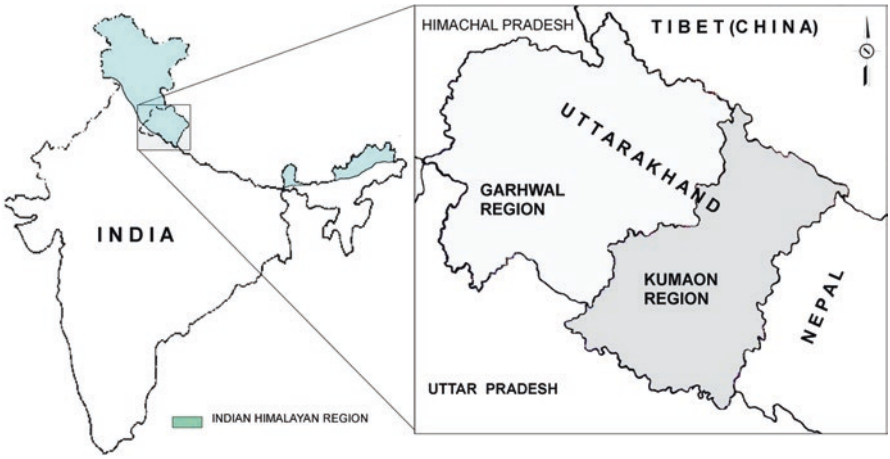

Fig. 1.1 Location and major regional divisions of Uttarakhand. (Regional divisions taken from Louise Tillin, Remapping India: New States and Their Political Origins (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2013), 97. Image from the author)

Scholars have identified several people as initiators of the movement, some being self-anointed "Gandhians," but few have drawn attention to the organizational and philosophical influences of two women of English birth, Madeleine Slade and Catherine Mary Heilemann, better known in India as Mira Behn[1] and Sarala Behn.[2] These women embodied Gandhian values and lived as Gandhi would have wanted, not as disciples or followers but in a manner that expanded and adapted, taught and put into practice, Gandhi's principles. The philosophy and teachings of these western associates of Gandhi had a formative influence on the struggle for social justice and ecological stability in the hills of north India. The current literature has omitted, trivialized, and obscured the contribution of these two women as the creative and catalyzing forces behind social and environmental transformations in Uttarakhand Himalaya, leading it toward sustainability.

These two women came to India inspired by Gandhi and his revolutionary ideas on nonviolent and equitable social and political reconstruction. Born in London within ten years of one another, their lives followed different pathways. Yet, as anti-imperialists and anti-colonialists, they sparred intellectually and spiritually with issues of social justice, freedom, equality, and human dignity. Abjuring western

[1] The word *behn* (spelled also as "ben" "behan," and "behen") is an appellation literally meaning "sister" in Hindi. It is appended to first names as a respectful form of address and surnames, if any, are not used with this term. It is widely used especially in the Gandhian context. For men, *bhai* (brother) is used as a term of address.

[2] The Indian names Mira Behn and Sarala Behn appear in documents, published or not, in a motley of varying expressions. Mira Behn is written as Miraben, Mirabai, Mirabei, Mirabehn, Meeraben, etc., and likewise the name Sarala Behn tends to be rendered often as Sarala Behen, Sarlaben, Saralabehn, etc. For the sake of consistency, however, I have referred to the names as Mira Behn and Sarala Behn throughout this book, unless otherwise when quoting from a specific source.

privileges, these women wholeheartedly embraced lives of voluntary poverty, lived and worked *with* and *among* the poorest of India, participated in India's independence movement, and went to prison for the cause. Their faith in nonviolence and their passion for eradicating colonialist, capitalist, patriarchal, and racist ideologies through humanitarian service brought them to Gandhi's constructive social work. This dimension of Gandhi's work has received little attention from his contemporaries, in comparison to his more visible mass mobilization efforts against the British rule (Nanda 2002, 7).

Gandhi's Constructive Program developed in the 1930s was a nonviolent and transformative social praxis fostering alternative conditions of living within socially sustainable, economically self-reliant, and self-governing local communities, which he called *Gram Swaraj*. This was an economic development model alternative to the conventional market economy. Emphasizing self-sufficiency, it made low demands on the earth's resources. Gandhi's aim here was to create a decentralized, nonviolent, and autonomous body of leaders who would undertake the responsibility of attaining village self-reliance in India. Political power would thus lie in the hands of India's vast rural communities rather than the central apparatus of the state subserving the interests of the urban/rural individualist elite. Gandhi realized that failure in mobilizing support for the constructive program would lead to perpetuating the centralized, modernist, and imperialist legacies of their colonial rulers in independent India, leading to the exploitation and marginalization of the vulnerable population (Pyarelal 1958, 674).

Toward his last days, Gandhi argued that after political independence from the British imperial rule, the Indian National Congress had "outlived its use" (Gandhi 1948, 32). He called upon its leaders not to represent the independent government as a narrow political party. He advised them to disband and convert the Congress into a decentralized *Lok Sevak Sangh* or Association for the Service of the People. In effect, this was to be a grassroots movement for moral, social, and economic independence, undertaking constructive work in the rural communities of India. Gandhi had faith that even if a few chose to stay outside of the political economy of a centralizing modern state, its power, institutions, and structures, there remained hope for the realization of a nonviolent social organization (Pyarelal 1958, 680).

It was Mira Behn and Sarala Behn among a few others (mostly men) such as J.C. Kumarappa, Vinoba Bhave, Jay Prakash Narayan (aka JP), and Kaka Kalelkar who took up Gandhi's unfinished work toward the attainment of such a society in India. In doing so, both these women breathed new life into Gandhi's Constructive Program, an idea previously ridiculed and abandoned by modern India, and strove to give it concrete shape in the context of mountain sustainability through their activities in the hills of North India. They advanced and extended Gandhi's Constructive Program for the rural communities, his philosophy on alternative readings of modernity, for social change, economic development, and ecological sustainability in the Himalayas. This book is an invitation to follow the story of these women's novel interpretation of Gandhi and their cognitive, motivational, and organizational contributions to human society that birthed environmental movements and that brought significant positive changes to the lives of women and men.

1.2 People's Movements in Uttarakhand Himalaya: The Missing "Spiritual Link"

Why, apart from a few studies (Bandyopadhyay 1992, 2004; Shiva 1988), have scholars not understood the seminal role of Mira Behn and Sarala Behn in the generation of the environmental movements in Uttarakhand? One reason could be that a majority of scholarly attention on Gandhi remains focused on his principle of nonviolent resistance or *Satyagraha* (adhering to truth-force or soul-force to fight injustice). Thus, movements that use Gandhian methods of nonviolent protest tend to be associated with Gandhi, and the immediate leaders and participants who use those tactics tend to be tagged "Gandhians." Therefore, little is known about the capacities for creative action and perceptual knowledge that is gained from Gandhian praxis, in other words, his Constructive Program under the framework of *Sarvodaya* (socioeconomic welfare of all). Thus, very few attempts are made to understand the nature of constructive social work in the hill country that formed the groundwork of these movements, created, inspired, and sustained by Mira Behn and Sarala Behn. The few studies that have mentioned the roles of Behns ("sisters") in these movements have not shed any light on the foundations of their thought or the implications of their thought for our world today (Shiva 1988; Guha 1998; Weber 2004). The existing literature has largely passed them over, in particular, their efforts in reconstructing post-independence Indian society in the light of Gandhi's vision. Scholarship on social and environmental movements in the Uttarakhand Himalaya has mainly concentrated on analysis and dissection of the origin of specific movements or contributions of specific individuals as initiators of those movements but has ignored a "weaving" together of movements to locate its common source. This cues the missing "spiritual link" of the present work, to borrow Goethe's expressions in the epigraph to this introduction, which in the poet's eye is the ability to see the whole in its parts. A lack of such holistic vision on the one hand and the exaltation of these women for their allegiance to Gandhi on the other have widened this gap in knowledge. This has trivialized, misrepresented, and eclipsed their role and legacy in two of the most important environmental movements of India and in Uttarakhand: the Chipko Movement and the protest against the Tehri high dam on the Bhagirathi River. This book attempts to address this gap.

As English women who knew both the India of the British Raj and India of the Indian National Congress, Mira Behn's and Sarala Behn's perceptions about how independent India might progress offer an important combination of European liberal democracy and Indian values related to society and nature. They found a new role for women and men in sociopolitical life in India models of knowledge, religiosity, and social intervention that made them critics of the imperial occupation and simultaneously reached new models of transcendence. In their efforts toward creating a transformative and equitable public space in India, these women questioned the colonial and postcolonial legacies of universalized notions of "development" that undermined local knowledge and practice and charted a course that engages with and applies diverse forms of knowledge, integrating communities of people, ecosystems, and nonhuman others. The action-oriented philosophy, which they

generated and practiced, catalyzed people's movements and transformed local attitudes toward life, nature, and society, and in the present context, brings insightful learning experiences that have not received the attention of the academic community.

In contrast to the existing autobiographical sketches of the women (Mira Behn 1960; Sarala Behn 2010), this book unfolds the dimensions of the Behns' philosophical framework, the experiences that led them to take up constructive social work in India, and the significance of their contributions to social and environmental movements in Uttarakhand Himalaya. In this work, I delineate the creative directions in which Gandhian sociopolitical and techno-scientific notions and experiments in rural development work for Sarvodaya have evolved through the lives, history of activism, and written contributions of these two women. The nature of their constructive work toward building self-reliant and sustainable rural communities in the mountains needs to be considered in the context of the transformations they brought about. Both women made meaningful contributions to thought on a new set of human values, socioeconomic reconstruction, and environmental conservation in "postcolonial" India, thereby enriching the diverse and dynamic character of the discourse on postcolonial culture (Boehmer and Chaudhuri 2011).[3] Hence, their interpretation of what the development of a newly independent society should be and what constitutes environmental sustainability and social empowerment are worthy of serious and systematic research. Their creative influence on the participation of local people in grassroots social development with environmental sustainability also needs examination in the light of the thoughts and activities they imbibed, nucleated, and expanded.

1.3 Gandhi and Western Women: Daughters or Disciples?

This book is not biographical research into the lives of Mira Behn and Sarala Behn. Neither is it focused on Gandhi and his ideas per se. Given the fame and prominence of Gandhi in India and abroad, it is often assumed that it was the attraction of his personality and his cause that drew these and many other western women (and men) to him. Thomas Weber's study (2011) is a case in point that focuses on Gandhi's relationship with such women. While Gandhi and his ideas certainly influenced the women in this study, the Gandhian perspective is not sufficient to understand their work and influence.[4] For one thing, I want to stress that they were not mere

[3] The term "postcolonial" is ambivalent in the sense that in academic discourse, it has come to imply not merely what comes after the end of colonial rule, but also indicative of social practices or movements of resistance beginning both before and after colonization. Boehmer and Chaudhuri (2011) have further questioned the very nature of postcolonialism as a universalist discourse based on cultural/regional and historical specifics.

[4] The tendency to put women's work under the banner of Gandhi's towering personage and high symbolism has masked the original contributions of women as important as his wife Kasturba (Kapadia 1989, 140–149).

"disciples" or "dutiful and devoted daughters" of Gandhi. Uncritical categorizations of Mira Behn and Sarala Behn as either daughters or disciples/devotees of Gandhi constitutes the claim of several scholars and of movie and festschrift accounts, the latter being more in the nature of a tribute than serious analyses (Suhrud and Weber 2014; Ellsberg 2005; Morton 1954; James 2009; Patel 1989; Attenborough 1982; Gupta 1992; Trivedi and Bhatt 1984; Bidushi 2011; Pant 2016). True or not, such appellations have done more harm than good in understanding these women, their lives, and their work. In categorizing them only as disciples or daughters, we tend to pigeonhole and see them in the shadow of Gandhi, and according to one source, as "blind follower[s]" of Gandhi's philosophy (Pant 2016, 55) but not as trailblazers, as leaders and initiators of new ideas and praxis, and critical thinkers in their own right. We thus undermine their own creative and independent agency.[5]

Interestingly, the nature of this popular guru–disciple discourse was quite alien to Gandhi's own. As Mira Behn recounts in her memoir that Gandhi, on no account, accepted anyone as a disciple and flatly refused to be looked upon as a guru (Mira Behn 1960, 75). He chastised any uncritical approach toward him, repealing the so-called unimpeachable status enjoyed by an Indian guru, and urged his constructive workers not to blindly agree to all his ideas or to adhere to any ideology without putting them to their rigorous scrutiny of reason. He did not wish his philosophy to be ossified into a dogma that denied its inherent dynamism and his practice to be sanctified and reduced to a mere sect. He once emphatically declared (Duncan 2005, 237):

> Let Gandhism be destroyed if it stands to error … if Gandhism is another name for sectarianism, it deserves to be destroyed … Let no one say that he is a follower of Gandhi. It is enough that I should be my own follower … you are no followers but fellow students, fellow pilgrims, fellow seekers, and fellow workers.

Moreover, the popularized notion of devotees or dedicated disciples of a preceptor or guru immediately becomes suspect when we notice, as in the course of this book, how often the views of the Behns differed from Gandhi's, how they questioned his ashram practices at times, and like him, denounced the adage "Gandhians" attributed to his followers (Mira Behn 1960, 75).

Considering all this, this book extends the thesis that Mira Behn and Sarala Behn were not typical followers or disciples of Gandhi. Their philosophies evolved from their own experiences of the encounter between the "East" and the "West," not from idealizing and following any one intellectual and spiritual tradition. In this dynamic intercultural exchange, they found viable alternatives to the modern concepts of scientific materialism, unlimited progress, and economic development. Their ideas were a creative integration of values from an extensive intellectual terrain that

[5] Sharon MacDonald, who so kindly shared her work with me, has also cogently argued this point. In her biographical research on a group of Western women who came to Gandhi during the colonial period, MacDonald aptly emphasizes that in putting the stamp of an Eastern notion of discipleship on these various Western women, we fail to approach them from a Western perspective. The latter, she observes, has maintained a certain distinction between discipleship and mentorship (MacDonald 2010).

cannot be reduced to the iconic attachment to one man and his theory. Hence, though associates of Gandhi, both Mira Behn and Sarala Behn moved in the world as active independent agents. Yet, they were "Gandhians" in the sense they were averse to putting their ideas into a fixed form, an idea abhorred by Gandhi himself. Both were fellow seekers of truth and believers of nonviolence and action in the real world, but they went beyond Gandhi, a quality which Gandhi himself desired and demanded from his coworkers. Be that as it may, these were not qualities they imbibed straight from Gandhi but a disposition of their free-thinking minds they had cultivated since their adolescence. In Gandhi, they found a kindred soul, as they found in others, to share common ideas and values. They incorporated those strands of modern western thinking and those of Gandhi's about human development that seemed relevant to their own. They also did not have faith in merely philosophizing, but in the pragmatism of action-oriented life in service of not this or that people or nation or identity, but of all humanity. As strong-willed independent women, Mira Behn and Sarala Behn were then coworkers or associates of Gandhi yet were different in their individual approaches and psychology, as I maintain throughout this book. Understanding the philosophy of the Behns therefore comes through an understanding of their practical life and work, their own independent contributions to social transformation in the hills of Uttarakhand and elsewhere in India, rather than through an exposition of Gandhi and his philosophy alone.

Beyond the haze of labels and monikers bestowed on them as so-called "disciples" of Gandhi, these women thus emerge as leaders initiating several projects after Gandhi's death, as outspoken critics of independent India's political and economic policies, and as astute environmentalists. These women held strong views and opinions against Eurocentrism, racism, colonialism, imperialism, and expansionism *before* they came to India to join Gandhi's cause. As such, they were naturally drawn toward the cause of sociopolitical and economic issues like discrimination and exploitation of the weaker sections of society. Thus, their contribution to the Indian independence movement and to post-independence environmental movements appears to be a logical outcome of the development of their own individual reflections and practical decisions with matters concerning social justice, equality, humanity, and nature. As activists and scholars, mentors, and mobilizers of the people, they worked hard and selflessly, spoke to diverse audiences, and wrote tirelessly to draw attention to social and environmental issues in India and the world.

1.4 Europeans in Colonial India: Race, Gender, and Culture Tropes

At the outset of this work, a question may be asked regarding their roles as Europeans in colonial India. Does their identity as British women privilege their status and reinforce the racial and cultural tropes of "white," "European," and "women" as

"civilizers" and hence the imperialist discourse and its heritage? Scholars such as Strobel (1991) and Burton (1994) have reasoned how race permeates both gender and class on the one hand and British nationalist ideologies and the social mission of the empire on the other, creating and morphing imperial history. Colonial India had many European women, the majority of whom came to live in India with their husbands and were addressed by the natives as *memsahibs* (married white upper-class women) and those who came from their home country to do missionary work. There were other diverse groups with "secular missions", as that of teachers and nurses, anthropologists, and social reformers (Strobel 1991, xi–xii). Most of these women believed in and identified with the empire and maintained a civilizational superiority over the colonized. There were Victorian feminists too, who according to Burton considered improving the lot of the Indian woman was part of the "white women's burden", an idea that served as justification for the civilizing mission of the imperial government and one that "ratified their own claims [of suffrage] on the imperial state" (Burton 1994, 10). Evidently, some women social reformers linked their own political emancipation and empowerment to the alleviation of their "imagined" condition of the "backward" women of the colonies and hence to Britain's special project of Enlightenment. These "imperial feminists", as Valerie Amos and Pratibha Palmer illustrates (2005), maintained their colonial identity and that too with respect to a racialized construct of the colonized other.

However, emergent scholars in this field, such as Sharon Macdonald (2010), point out that there were many who did not fit in this reformist and/or feminist group and even left their missions (social or religious) to become supporters of the Indian cause for liberation. Many of these women found in Gandhi and his nonviolence a spiritual power to challenge the colonizing and missionizing activities of Britain and a vision of a society free from race, class, caste, gender, ethnic, and religious prejudices. While the social and political reform activities these women undertook in India may match those of the colonial British feminists, they differed significantly from their feminist counterparts in that they were anti-colonial and anti-racist, exhibited nonconformist backgrounds, were critical of Christian patriarchy, but were spiritually motivated and believed in nonviolence. The two women discussed in this book thus go beyond traditionalist accounts of European women in colonial India. They were individual seekers and free thinkers who searched for truth and justice and strove single-mindedly to turn their ideals into action.

In his pathbreaking work, Edward Said described how power, when exercised in the context of imperialism as "orientalism," could construct imagined and stereotyped identities of the East as the exotic "other" in contrast to that of a progressive and modern West. From a Saidian perspective, sociocultural and political encounters between the British and the Indian natives are seen for the most part as a "clash of civilizations," an exercise of power and resistance, identity of which is garbed in the mutually exclusive terms of colonizer and colonized, Westerner and Indian, dominant and subordinate, and superior and inferior. While dialectical themes and constructs of "the native and the colonial" encounter narrative could help address how power is exercised and resisted to bring about change to the material and social

conditions of the people, it is equally germane to ask if alternate encounters could exist. Opposing power constructs, observes Makarand R. Paranjape (2012, 200), is often counterproductive in the sense that it fails to "produce the kind of breakthrough [necessary] in which both can not only co-exist but get transformed." Paranjape suggests that instead of endless struggle and strife, narratives of people, ideologies, systems, and even civilizations could enter into dialogue, thus generating new and nonviolent spaces of autonomy and consciousness. In colonial India, this was the alternative space created by the Gandhian discourse on *Swaraj* (self-rule), which aimed to process out of meaningful encounters, a new sociopolitical and cultural order in which autonomous self-regulating individuals could live with dignity and respect.[6] A moral and a spiritual ideal and not just political freedom from imperial rule, Swaraj inspired a different conception of power, one that would not only free people from oppression but also dissolve the structures that support it (Paranjape 2012, 249). As social thinkers and partakers of this Gandhian discourse on Swaraj, Mira Behn and Sarala Behn situated themselves critically and creatively beyond any universalistic or exclusivist stance or "East/West" dichotomy. They defied the cultural superiority of Euro-centric traditions as well as actively contested the established norms and standards that defined the traditional encounter of "West" and "East." These women built upon and expanded Gandhi's concept of a liberating space of nonviolent action for social change by engaging with the two worlds both dialogically and transversally, transforming the norms and standards of relations between people, communities, cultures, nations, and the world. Interestingly, in this cross-cultural encounter, both distanced themselves from externally imposed self-identities or social constructs, such as those related to family, race, gender, religion, class, and nationality. This process of active and conscious self-decentering from and rejection of social conformities and ideologies paralleled their personal spiritual quests and transformations, as both are necessary to transcend the rigid boundaries between the inner self and the world at large. Thus, while these women, as community activists and global citizens, did practical work for nonviolent social change in the outer world, their practice reflected an inner search for truth that illuminated and gave meaning to their individual spiritual journeys. Rather than retire to an inner sphere of private "bliss," spirituality in the above sense includes active responsibility toward addressing violence and injustices caused by the structures of power, whether social, religious, economic, or political.

The Behns' contributions to social reform in colonial and postcolonial India thus involve an understanding of imperialism and its constructs along with a critical engagement with challenging and rejecting racist, classist, casteist ideologies; religious dogma; and gender stereotypes. Their long-term presence in India added to

[6] Swaraj literally means self-governance and/or self-rule, and the word comes from the two Sanskrit roots, *swa* meaning self and *raj* meaning rule. In ordinary terms, it would mean home rule, implying political freedom of the Indian people from the British. However, Gandhi expanded the meaning to embrace economic, social, and moral freedom implying a society that is nonexploitative and respectful of its citizens and in which the individual consciously employs self-restraint and assumes responsibility (hence rules the self) for the other.

their work and thought spent on living with and collaborating with native people subverts the homogeneous constructs of colonizer/powerful vs. colonized/powerless discourse and accords a new dimension to the study of western, expressly British women's contributions to transformative social praxis and reform. As such, the thoughts of these two women were unlike those of many other European and American women who came to serve the cause of the Indians in colonial India. Some of them who followed the Indian nationalist leaders or spiritual gurus of the times idolized the men they admired, became disillusioned with modern culture and western religious orthodoxy, and believed that social evils were the result of a fall from a utopian Golden Vedic Age. Although many such western women became prominent teachers and social reformers in India, this contribution often came at the cost of essentializing "East" and "West" (Jayawardena 1995, 108, 119–120). By framing the question in oppositional terms of "East" versus "West" and then presenting those distinctions as 'natural' often encourage rigid assumptions about cultures (such as references to a glorious past) that create problems as it reinforces dichotomy and exclusion. It perpetuates stereotypes in which a "spiritual East" becomes the antidote of all socioeconomic and cultural ills of a "material West." Such characterization of Indian culture and society as a distinct identity, with an emphasis on the differences, real or imagined, from the West, not only hinders the development of constructive ideas but also prevents the dialectical relationship with western traditions from taking place (Sen 2005, 169). Furthermore, it ignores the way in which post–World War II political-economic climate and its enterprise of industrial modernity and development deepened the dichotomy between East and West, fashioned out from models of development and underdevelopment and extended into sociopolitical and cultural spheres (Escobar 1995, 34). As dissenters from both western modernity and religious orthodoxies, Mira Behn and Sarala Behn did not dismiss western ideas nor embrace those of the East indiscriminately. As will be evident in this book, for these women, the philosophy and practice of "East" and "West" were more complementary though not without differences.

1.5 Worldviews and Sustainability

This book does not read the lives of either of these personalities as mere representatives of their times. Rather, I read their contributions synchronically as contemporaneous with our times, speaking to us in the present. In this light, the worldview of the Behns becomes significant to consider as it presents epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical principles and practices with both local and global significance. This is important also because the present studies on Gandhian roots of environmental movements in India remain focused on economics and social ecology with insufficient attention to worldview constructs or the interactions of values, beliefs,

and attitudes in addressing ecological and social problems.[7] A worldview in this context can be expressed as "a comprehensive model of reality" that combines "beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values, and ideas" from "formulations and interpretations of past, present, and future" (Schlitz et al. 2010, 19). A worldview may cover "both religious and non-religious frameworks of meaning" but exhibits a more mobile and adaptable quality and an openness that could respect alternative viewpoints in contrast to rigid/institutional constructs such as an ideology or religion (Hedlund-de Witt 2013, 40). Interestingly, a worldview can be both static and evolving depending on the intensity and profundity of some core experience that compels one to shift one's way of viewing the world. Schlitz et al. describe a dynamic worldview as transformative, entailing other-regarding behavior and a perspectival shift resulting in "long-lasting changes in people's sense of self, perception of relationship to the world around them, and way of being" (Schlitz et al. 2010, 20). This study examines what these women and their worldviews have to offer in the creation of a social and environmental ethic and toward the continuity and transformations that have taken place in Gandhian thought and praxis in post-independence India. I attempt to show how both strove to develop a social and environmental ethic that emerged out of a philosophical rapprochement of the rich Eastern traditions with the scientific epistemology and humanistic agenda of the West.

Equally important, the working ideas of both these women generated new consciousness of sustainability in India, which, I submit, constitutes a useful and creative contribution to the search for and implementation of current global ideas of sustainability and to human emancipation in our times. Globally, the concept of sustainability is a contested term expressing diverse and conflicting meanings. The 1987 Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development[8] put forward the principles of meeting the basic needs of the poor and intergenerational equity linking "poverty alleviation, environmental improvement, and social equitability through sustainable economic growth" (Mebratu 1998, 501–502). However, the lack of an implementable and operable concept has generated and fanned critical debates and disagreement on the nature, scope, and content as well as the temporal dimensions of sustainability. Some critics have suggested that the ambiguity in the concept of sustainable development and its anthropocentric conception of "needs" often allows for the erroneous equation of sustainable development to conventional growth-oriented economic development (Redclift 1987; Gibson 1991). This focus has generated a "resource management" perspective on sustainability that stresses technological efficiency, cost–benefit analysis, expert advice, market solutions, and

[7] Historian Ramachandra Guha has explored the ecological thoughts of Mira Behn and Gandhian economist Joseph Cornelius Kumarappa in the area of forestry and agriculture. However, he dwells mostly on the economics and sociological aspects of their environmental ideas, saying little about the ethical (Guha, 1998, 2006, 102–104). Gandhian scholar, Mark Lindley has discussed the relevance of Kumarappa's concept of sustainable economy, "Permanent Economy" to current debates in ecological economics. In this work as well, the value constructs and ethics of such an economy receive less attention than they should have (Lindley 2007, 147–148 and 152–154).

[8] The Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN-WCED 1987).