

## Mira Behn: A Gandhian, An Ecologist in Her Own Right

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### Abstract

Gandhian philosophy is relevant to the contemporary world. His ideas regarding self-reliance, swadeshi, environment, and village life are eternal. Through his programs and projects he endeavoured to imbibe these ideas in Indians. His associates played a vital role in taking his plans to the people. Mira Behn was such a Gandhian who dedicated her life to realising these Gandhian ideals. Though a foreigner, she took up the task of applying the views of Gandhi not only to her life but to also the lives of millions of Indians. This paper acknowledges the vigour and selfless acts of Mira Behn. It also reveals how she developed her own ways to apply Gandhian philosophy to contemporary life in India.

**Key words:** Gandhian Philosophy, self-reliance, environment, village life, Mira Behn, selfless, contemporary

Gandhian philosophy has a great influence over the world today. There is hardly any aspect of man's life that has been left untouched by his notions or writings. We speak of his relevance in peaceful relations among state, practice of Satyagraha, his views on nature and environment, education to name a few. Sadly, we tend to look at each of these from a different perspective which takes away the very soul of these ideas. To understand Gandhi, it is crucial that we maintain a holistic approach. His philosophy is meant to be applied in totality and not in tit-bits as the world seems to be doing now. The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi is a way of life, it is the foundation of a civilisation.

Very soon after returning from South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi became the driving force behind socio-political activities in India. So much so that his name reached beyond the boundaries of India. People were in awe of this wonder of a man who preached only that which he could practice. He was someone who accepted that life is not about rigidity but dynamism. Through the Ashrams he established, Gandhi practiced and made his followers practice a way which would lead to the ultimate realisation of Life. Many, from other countries left their homes and became his followers. One such name is Madeleine Slade, known as Mira Behn in India. This paper is an attempt to present the transition of Madeleine Slade to Mira Behn, her association with Gandhi and ultimately the evolution of Mira Behn as an ecologist.

The story of Mira Behn is an extraordinary one. She was born in a highly affluent family in England. Her father was a high-ranking Naval Officer moving in circles of Prime Ministers and Aristocrats. Madeleine, as Mira Behn was called then, was raised in the countryside by her Grandparents. This is where she developed her love and attachment to nature, a guiding force which made her a passionate ecologist. Since her childhood Mira Behn was moved by Music, especially Beethoven's Tempest. She was so influenced by Beethoven that she stayed in Bonn and Vienna as though on a pilgrimage. It was here that Romain Rolland acquainted her to Gandhi; in the form of his work and writings. This

created in her an instant longing to meet Gandhi. She wanted to be a part of Gandhi's work and way of life. Regarding her first visit with Bapu she writes,

“As I entered, I became conscious of a small spare figure rising up from a white gaddi and stepping towards me. I knew it was Bapu. He said, “you shall be my daughter.” (Behn 1949: 7)

Once in India, Madeleine, now Mira Behn, was eager to learn and to participate in the activities of Mahatma Gandhi at the ashram as well as outside it. She had to learn the harsh way. But very soon she became an active participant in various projects of Gandhi. Mira Behn's earliest participation was in the Khadi movement. She studied and gave her opinions on the technical and productive aspects of it not only to other ashramites but also to Gandhi. She became a participant in the various dieting experiments in the ashram. Mira Behn became an emissary for the Mahatma on several occasions, especially to the British rulers. She also travelled abroad to the United States, England and met Winston Churchill, General Halifax to plead the case of India. She travelled wide and far throughout India as well. She accompanied Gandhi to the Sessions of the Congress and also to important meetings like the Round Table Conference in London.

Later Mira Behn was sent to various parts in India like the Ashrams and centres in New Delhi and Pune. She played decisive role in building these ashrams. She played a significant role in the upliftment activities like removal of untouchability, sanitation, hygiene, agriculture, animal care. In the late 1920s, Mira Behn completely shifted her activities to rural development and reconstruction. She believed that by doing so she was 'doing true service to Bapu'. This change evolved her from being the daughter of Gandhi to an activist in her own right. Mira Behn worked on various projects like those in Sind, Segaoon in Wardha which had mixed results and those in Orissa, Rishikesh as well.

Mira Behn loved nature and the countryside since she was a child. More than just love and admiration, she found in such life a satisfaction which was pious. Like Gandhi Mira Behn too was critical of modern civilisation. She expressed her reservations regarding it and its ills especially the degradation of environment. She aimed to have her own ashram to fulfil the dream to have a life closer to nature. Her mission was realised when she established her own Ashram, Kisan Ashram. She had chosen the foothills of the Himalayas for her ashram and was quite pleased when she did as according to her, 'it has a glorious view of the Great Himalayan Range. (Behn, Spirit's Pilgrimage 260). The ashram saw steady success early on in Khadi production, rearing cattle. Behn also ensured that classes were being run for children from the neighbouring areas.

Mira Behn had run many programs relating to food, management of resources successfully in India during the war. The Government in acceptance of her success appointed her as the advisor to the British Government in their Grow More Food Campaign in 1946. She travelled and studied the cases in rural India to increase food production. In post-independence India she handed over her ashram to the Rural Development Department and established a new one named Pashulok in Rishikesh. This was the first ever ashram to

care for the old dry cattle. It also undertook activities like ‘upgrading local breed of cattle, compost-making, agro-forestry’.(Behn, Spirit’s Pilgrimage 293).

In 1951, Mira Behn established another Gopal Ashram in the Himalayas. There she started the Bapu Raj Patrika in 1952 which advocated the Gandhian Philosophy of self-reliant India. It is during this time that she also turned her attention to deforestation in the region. For her the issue was not only regarding planting trees but planting ‘ecologically appropriate trees’ (Shiva 1988: 69). She established a connection between floods in the Gangetic plains and deforestation on the hills. She wrote extensively in the Harijan regarding the self-reliance, environmental issues, khadi during these times. In the second half of the 1950s, Mira Behn due to her suffering health moved back to the West, first to England and later to Austria, the land of her beloved Beethoven, where she remained till her death in early 1980s.

To refer to Mira Behn just as disciple or daughter of Gandhi would be to do grave injustice to her and her work for the nation. She may have come to India for Gandhi and may have also spent many years in his shadow but she found her own path and standing in the country which was not her by birth but rather by choice. ‘No matter where she was in India ... she continued to emulate and even went beyond Gandhi’s movement and values. She invented creative ways to advance his ideas suitable for a different world’ (Malerk 2022: 232).

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