

Sushri Sarala Devi

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1979

Born in 1901 in England, Miss Catherine Mary Heilemann adopted the name of Sarala Devi after she came to India and settled down here in 1932. During the last four decades she has devoted herself to the service of the poor and the downtrodden in her country of adoption, and has become a symbol of service and sacrifice.

Her motherly image is enshrined in the hearts of the mountain people, particularly the women of the Uttarakhand region of Uttar Pradesh. She has become completely Indian in her mode of living and is accepted as one of them by the rural folk in the areas where she is working. She speaks and writes mostly in Hindi, in which she has acquired great proficiency.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, although she was still a girl, she was appalled by the mass murders committed by man on man in the name of patriotism. She was perplexed by the paradox that common men who were peaceful neighbours and friends became bitter enemies overnight with the declaration of war between their countries by kings and politicians in power.

The War also affected her personal life profoundly. Although her father, a Swiss national, was as much opposed to German imperialism as any British subject, because of some legal misunderstanding on his nationality he was interned as an enemy national. Members of the Heilemann family suffered ostracism at the hands of their erstwhile friends. As a result, Catherine became a rebel against society as a whole governments, cities and large scale industries which were the root cause of evil. She spent much of her time wandering alone in fields and forests, greatly agitated in mind and trying to find her identity.

This mood continued till about 1927, when she met some Indian students in Britain and heard from them for the first time about Mahatma Gandhi and his message of love and truth. She was greatly attracted by his philosophy of life and wished to join him, but Gandhiji, perhaps to test the firmness of her resolve, wrote to her advising her 'not to do anything so mad'. But her desire to come to India persisted.

Catherine Heilemann got an opportunity to come to India in 1932 to serve as a teacher in an educational institution at Udaipur which, she thought, was run on the lines of Gujarat Vidyapeeth founded by Gandhiji. But she found that it was just another modern school. Work among the children was emotionally satisfying to her, but as she had come to India 'to serve the poorest, the loneliest and the lost', she was disappointed.

Sarala Devi, as she was now known, went to Ahmedabad in 1936 intending to work for the cause of industrial labour in the Mazdoor Sangh, but could find no niche there. Moreover, she was laid up with dysentery and had to go to Bombay for treatment. Later she went to Wardha at the invitation of Shri Jamnalal Bajaj.

It was here that she found work after her own heart, suited to her temperament and genius. She became a member of Aryanayakam's family and a colleague in his educational work at Sevagram. But she had to give it up as ill health continued to dog her and the climate did not suit her. In 1941, Gandhiji advised her to go to Almora for a rest cure with the parting instructions: "For a year, take up no work regain your health and get to know the people and the conditions, and then decide on your future work".

A year later, an opportunity to serve the people came her way. As a result of the 'Quit India' movement on 1942, all the workers of the Chanauda Ashram (Almora district) had been arrested on

false charges of arson and the Ashram sealed. Her task was clear to Sarala Devi: She decided to organize legal defense for the accused and render help to their families. The Commissioner threatened her that 'they shall all swing', but she went about her work undaunted. She herself suffered two terms of imprisonment for disobeying an internment order. These conditions prevailed till 1945.

During this time Sarala Devi came to know many political sufferers and established contacts with the common people and was instinctively drawn to the simple hill folk of the region. She found that their real strength lay with their women. Though they were educationally and socially backward, they were hardy and industrious. She formulated a plan for setting up an institution at Kausani for helping women to overcome their handicaps and to carve out a brighter future for them.

She met Gandhiji at Pune in 1945 after his release from jail to seek his blessings. Gandhiji simply told her: "I have such complete faith in your commonsense that I believe whatever work you take up will be practical. But remember it is not good to take up a thing and fail." Sarala Devi confidently replied: "I do not know what you mean by success or failure. If the people condemn me that I am ruining the girls from their point of view of caste and social customs, I shall not fear. If they praise me, I shall not rejoice. I shall know regarding success or failure after twenty years (which incidentally was Gandhiji's time limit for a 'life worker'), when my girls have faced the public with courage and won them over, or else succumbed to the local social environment." Gandhiji was satisfied with her approach to the problem.

In 1946 she established the Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal at Kausani, an institution designed to help the poor, ignorant, backward and oppresses women of the Kumaon, Garhwal and other mountain districts of Uttar Pradesh. The aim was to create a sense of self-confidence in them by making them self-supporting and self-reliant.

In order to help the younger generation of women to face life with confidence when they come of age, she established the Lakshmi Ashram at Kausani, a residential basic school for girls, where they were taught through the crafts of agriculture, dairying and wool-spinning and weaving. The school was deliberately made agriculture-based in order to discourage the exodus of educated women from the villages to the cities which denuded the villages of their talent. Over the years, the institution has developed from the primary to the post-basic stage. It is self-supporting and self-reliant. Some of the students have married local social workers and continued to work in the institution; others have gone over for social work in the villages on their own. Sarala Devi herself has been constantly moving from village to village mostly on foot to carry the message of hope to the women in these backward tracts.

During her stay at Kausani, Sarala Devi was the main inspiration behind a campaign to introduce prohibition in the mountain regions in which a large number of women actively participated. The Government had to yield to their demand. She also carried on a campaign for forest preservation and development as the area was being gradually denuded of its forest wealth. She was also deeply concerned with the pollution of agricultural fields due to the mechanization of agricultural operations and wrote a book on the subject.

As the twenty years of work drew successfully to a close, she began to feel that this institutionalized education, *Nai Talim*, however 'new' it was when it was first conceived by Gandhiji and his associates, was getting out of date. The present need was for something simpler and more in touch with village life, if real *Gram Swarajya* was to be established for the salvation of the teeming millions of the country living mainly in the villages. In 1966, Sarala Devi decided to move on to newer fields of work.

Her fellow workers, however, decided to continue the work of the institutions established by her. During the last thirteen years many new activities have been taken on hand by them to enlarge the scope of their work, deriving inspiration from Sarala Devi although she is physically absent from the scene.

Acharya Vinobaji confirmed Sarala Devi's opinion that a new approach was needed to tackle the country's present problems. Elaborating on this theme, he said that the time was over when we should act as mother, father and guru rolled into one now was the time for *Vyapak Lok Shikshan*, an all-embracing mass education programme for establishing *Gram Swarajya*, utilizing *Stri Shakti* (Women's Power) and *Lok Yatra* (carrying the message to the people through extensive and intensive tours from village to village). For ten years, Sarala Devi traveled on foot or otherwise in many parts of the country, mainly in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, propagating her views. During this period she also spent one year in the dacoit-infested areas of Chambal Valley and Morena, working for a change of heart among the dacoits and trying to persuade them to surrender themselves.

Sarala Devi intended to settle down in the South, but the affection of the people of Uttarakhand, who built a house for her at Dharamghar village in Pithoragarh district and invited her to come and settle down there, called her back to her old scene of activities.

During the last three years, Sarala Devi has been confined to her home and is hardly able to move out due to acute asthmatic trouble. But, even at the age of 78, her zeal for public work has not diminished. She is continuing her efforts for *Vyapak Lok Shikshan* through the press. She is convinced that the India of Gandhiji's dreams, which envisage the complete emancipation of the lowliest of the low from political, economic and social thralldom can be achieved only through the adoption of the Constructive Programme in its totality. She firmly believes that India, nay the entire world, can survive only by accepting Gandhiji's principles.

