

A Gandhian 'romance': Setting the record straight



BOOK REVIEW

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In 1936, long after Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had drifted apart, in an interview with the advocate of birth control, Margaret Sanger, Gandhi confessed that he had had a “spiritual companionship” with a woman with a “broad cultural education” and with whom he had “nearly slipped” but had been “saved” by those around him. An upper-class, university-educated *bhadramahila* from the aristocratic Tagore lineage who adopted the khadi sari with panache, toured with Gandhi and gave impassioned speeches at public

gatherings on the nationalist cause, Sarala Devi was certainly a bit of an enigma, different from many other politically active women. Clearly, this is what attracted Gandhi — and made jealous courtiers damn her as “an ambitious vamp”.

Given the *dramatis personae*, it required the well-known and conscientious feminist historian, Geraldine Forbes, to painstakingly trace what she calls a “political friendship”, through 79 letters written mainly in 1920 by Gandhi to Sarala Devi. Contextualising the letters that diligent sleuthing led her to believe were genuine, Ms Forbes lays to rest much of the controversy surrounding these two celebrities. Way back in the 1970s, she had been given typed copies of the letters by Sarala Devi’s son, Dipak Dutt Chaudhry. As only five of Sarala Devi’s letters survive, even though her commitment to Gandhi as a leader is known, her response to one to whom she became very close remains elusive.

Though Ms Forbes feels that many of Gandhi’s letters, too, were missing, she constructs a convincing narrative that goes well beyond “books and articles that declared Sarala’s and Gandhi’s relationship a ‘romance’ or, for the very enthusiastic, ‘an affair.’”

Born in 1872 to Rabindranath Tagore’s older sister Swarna Kumari, well before her marriage in 1905 and her encounters with Gandhi, the elegant Sarala Devi was already an accomplished exponent of Rabindra Sangeet, composer and writer. Clearly an organisational diva, towards the end of the 19th century, a strong commitment to self-defence led her to set up *akharas* for young men and later “the first women’s organisation with an all-India focus”, Bharat Stri Mahamandal. As her husband Rambhaji Dutt Chaudhary was a well-known Punjabi Congressman, it was only natural that, on his first visit to Punjab, Gandhi should enlist the support of this power couple. By then, his belief that women, if organised, would be a

force to reckon with, was no secret. When, in October 1919, Gandhi came to live in the Chaudharys’ Lahore home that also housed many relatives and servants, Rambhaji was in prison. Thus, though Gandhi and Sarala Devi might have had plenty of private time to discuss life and the emerging political scenario, Ms Forbes makes clear that there was nothing improper about Gandhi’s presence in the house.

Following his departure, there was a flurry of letters — there had been a promise of an exchange of daily epistles — and Gandhi urged Sarala Devi to share his with Rambhaji, and he’d often make more than a passing reference to him. In March 23, he wrote from Delhi, “It is early

morn and you occupy my first attention. You are therefore [missing word] to me, but I want you to be that always and to the whole of India. This can only happen if you will realize yourself and if Panditji

[Rambhaji] will let you.”

In the same letter, regretting that Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, an important Congressman, did not have time “to listen to my new ideas,” he adds, “you are absorbed

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and interested in them and you have an analytical and clear brain. I therefore love to talk to you about my experiments and *praise (sic)* your helpful criticism of them.” Given to expressing himself and his love freely in letters with many people with whom he corresponded, Gandhi

frequently writes of missing Sarala Devi.

At the same time, Ms Forbes feels that there was enough evidence to show that Sarala Devi “frequently resisted his [Gandhi’s] efforts to remake her”. Perhaps a portent of their drifting apart, on August 23, he wrote “Your letters have caused me distress. You do not like my sermons. And yet so long as you remain a school girl, what should I do except giving (*stc*) you sermons?”. Gandhi had visions of Sarala Devi being India’s Shakti, and an important stakeholder in his movement. But he was to be the “law giver,” she the student. The independent-minded Sarala Devi, however, was not prepared to give up her home, nor it would seem, accept the diktats of the non-cooperation movement. The correspondence between Gandhi and Sarala Devi petered out after 1920. As did a brief, most intense, undoubtedly intriguing relationship of the pre-independence era, brought alive by Ms Forbes’ empathetic handling of primary sources, relevant Gandhiana and other material.

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