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FEMINISM'S FIREBRAND FLAG-BEARER

The book brings to light the many achievements of Sarala Devi who was a voracious reader and a prolific writer of 30 books and 300 essays despite the lack of formal education

By ANUJA CHANDRAMOULI

Sachidananda Mohanty's compilation of the assorted writings of the remarkable Sarala Devi, which includes her essays on feminism and empowerment of women as well as short stories for children, provides a fascinating insight into the life and times of a veritable firebrand who fought not just for the rights of women but the downtrodden from all walks of life. The editor deserves a pat on the shoulder for his efforts in bringing to light the tremendous achievements of a woman who does not deserve to be forgotten by history.

A foreword by Geraldine Forbes and a detailed introduction by Mohanty establish a proper context that allows the voice of Sarala Devi to ring out loud and clear in her own words. Despite her lack of formal education, she was a voracious reader and a prolific writer who authored 30 books and 300 essays on a staggering array of subjects such as art, politics, feminism, literature, children's stories and spirituality. A renowned freedom fighter, educator, political and social activist, Sarala Devi

Sarala Devi



ILLUSTRATION BY PRADYUT

A renowned freedom fighter, Sarala Devi's interaction with Gandhi and the influence he wielded over her outlook to life makes for an intriguing read

founded Alakashram with her husband and organised the Utkal Mahila Sammilani to fight for women's rights in addition to becoming the first woman who was an elected representative of the Odisha Assembly where she emerged as a tireless champion of progressive causes like education, welfare and remarriage of widows. Devi also picked up cudgels against the evil practices of dowry, prostitution and child marriage.

Sarala Devi's interaction with Gandhi and the influence he wielded over her outlook to life makes for intriguing reading. According to Devi, "He unfolded the hundred petals of the lotus in my heart and lighted the flame of revolution within me." An active participant in the Salt Satyagraha, she was imprisoned in Vellore prison with other likeminded individuals where she continued to educate herself by learning Hindi, English and spinning.

A passionate advocate of women's rights, Sarala Devi devoted much of her life to drawing the attention of the nation to the plight of Odia women who were oppressed by religion and society alike which prevented them from achieving their full poten-

tial as worthy citizens. She went on to emphasise that the problem was a nationwide occurrence and that India will never achieve greatness if its daughters were not allowed to grow and contribute.

Despite her views being far ahead of their time, some of her opinions particularly regarding that of 'Western Education' and its adverse impact on the fabric

of our culture and society, which she believed was destroying the 'values' essential to the Indian 'way of life', will not have many takers today. However, that said, her writings also reveal the mammoth task undertaken by the earliest feminists when they fought against a patriarchal society to lay the foundation for the rights that so many women today take for granted. It would never

do to forget or undermine the work of Sarala Devi and others like her who paved the way for a better tomorrow not just for women but for the poor and exploited. *The Lost World of Sarala Devi* is a worthy read, though one wishes that the translation though earnest had done a better job of retaining the fire of Sarala Devi, which one can only sense.



The Lost World of Sarala Devi: Selected Writings

Edited by:
Sachidananda Mohanty

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