



Sudipta Datta

SEPTEMBER 09, 2017 19:10 IST

UPDATED: SEPTEMBER 08, 2017 19:13 IST

Rediscovering the works of a literary feminist and activist

Writing in 1934, Sarala Devi was aware about the movement around the world over the question of independence of women, concluding that “there is little doubt that the agitation will bear fruit in the near future.”

Women have come a long way since, but many areas of darkness still remain, especially in the State she hailed from, Odisha. She highlighted some of these in *Utkalara Nari Samasya* (The Problems of Women in Odisha), pointing at the discrimination between boys and girls in primary education, of girls being trapped in marriage before they finish school, and was scathing in her criticism of her people: “The solution to our problem lies within our mind... Our race should develop an attitude that is conducive to the uplift of women.”

As Sachidananda Mohanty, who has edited the book, tells us in the introduction, Sarala Devi was an iconic literary feminist and activist who lived and wrote in the first half of the 20th century but whose works have disappeared from the public domain. It’s a life and writing that mustn’t be forgotten, not least because of its contribution to the moulding of Indian feminism.

Poet, novelist, short-story writer, critic, translator and columnist, Sarala Devi was also a freedom fighter, a social reformer and a staunch Gandhian from the time she was 16 years old when her husband Bhagirathi Mohapatra took her to the Nagpur meeting of the Indian National Congress in December 1920. Born on August 9, 1904, she lived through some of the most critical periods of our history, including the freedom struggle, the two World Wars, the joy over the creation of the Indian republic and the subsequent disillusionment, and recorded it all in her essays, speeches, social critiques, her portraits of the people she admired. Her literary output includes more than 30 books and 300 essays. But two of her most interesting collections must surely be *Beera Ramani* and *Bishwa Biplabini*, life sketches of heroic women she admired – from Lakshmi Bai, Panna Devi, Bundi Mahishi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Kalpana Dutta, among others.

Sarala Devi can hardly contain her awe at Kalpana Dutta’s act of valour, an associate of the revolutionary leader Surya Sen of the Chittagong Armoury Raid in 1930. In 1996, Manini Chatterjee wrote a comprehensive history of the raid in *Do and Die: The Chittagong Uprising 1930-34*. Sarala Devi’s account is from 1958, and she writes of Kalpana Dutta: “The extraordinary courage displayed by a young woman from Chattagram in Bengal [now Chittagong, in Bangladesh] fills us with a sense of wonder. She confronted an army equipped with modern weapons not once or twice but thrice. She escaped like a gust of wind while bullets fell like raindrops around her.”

***The Lost World of Sarala Devi: Selected Writings*; Edited by Sachidananda Mohanty, Oxford University Press, ₹795.**