NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

New Series
42

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Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2014

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 978-93-83650-08-8

Price Rs. 100/-; US $ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

Building Impressions: Gandhi and Mira Behn's hut: 1935–1936[1]

Venugopal Maddipati*

Abstract

In 1936, The Indian politician and votary of non violence, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi appreciated a hut that had been built in the village of Veroda in west central India by the British-born social worker Mira Behn, as a testament to her impressionability. In Gandhi's understanding, Mira Behn's hut was a measure of how affected her mind had become by the task of serving those who lived simply, within the means of a village. In my essay, then, I will consider how, in 1936, impressionability itself became a salient theme in Gandhi's imagination, particularly in the context of his pursuit of a practicable form of village improvement in India. Moreover, I will explore how Gandhi's emphasis on impressionability came to play a part in the manner in which he conceived a space of the spirit that was, arguably, immune from becoming affected.

[1] I would like to thank Professors Catherine Asher, Frederick Asher and Ajay Skaria, at the University of Minnesota for their encouragement and their patience. In this paper I substantially revised some portions of my dissertation at the University of Minnesota. I would like to thank Professor Ashis Nandy for having supported my application at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, where I have written this paper. I would also like to thank Professors Ravi Sundaram, Hilal Ahmad, Bindia Thapar, Sameer Kuruve, Vibha Gupta, Varsha Kaley and the Center of Science for Villages in Wardha, near Sewagram.

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In July 1936, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 –1948) praised a hut that had been built in the village of Veroda in west-central India by the British-born social worker Mira Behn (1892 –1982). Gandhi had himself recently settled in the village of Segaon, about a mile from Veroda, with the intention of cultivating a practicable form of village development; he was keen on exploring a model of village improvement that was commensurate to the materials circumstances of those who lived in an Indian village. If he spoke at length about the hut Mira Behn had built for herself in Veroda out of such locally available materials as mud, bamboo and waste stone, he did so because he was fascinated by how she had allowed her awareness of her own immediate circumstances to leaven her thoughts about a home for herself.[2] In this paper, I will consider how Mira Behn, in Gandhi's appreciation, had been affected enough by circumstances, to think of a home for herself in the limiting terms and criteria of an architecture that was practicable in a village.

That Gandhi's ideas concerning practicability, particularly that of village improvement in India, had matured well before his stay in Segaon, is evident in his criticism, in 1929, of Frank Lugard Brayne (1882–1952), the former Deputy Commissioner of Gurgaon District in the north of the country. That year, Gandhi, in his report titled "Village Improvement", had severely disparaged Brayne's book, *The Remaking of Village India.*[3] In Gandhi's understanding, Brayne's book, which was based on his work in the Gurgaon district, did not adequately take into account the penury of those living in India's villages. For instance, in the context of Brayne's emphasis upon a need for mosquito nets, vaccination and inoculation in India's villages, Gandhi had observed:

> The assurance with which Mr. Brayne speaks of vaccination and inoculation is amazing when one knows that medical authorities speak of both with the greatest caution… Quinine without milk is a useless remedy, and mosquito-nets, I know from personal experience, are not within the reach of millions. More than once has Mr. Brayne betrayed ignorance of the chronic economic distress of the seething millions of

> India. It is perfectly useless to suggest remedies which are beyond the present means of the people. What the people may be capable of doing when the reformer's dream is realized is irrelevant to a consideration of what they ought to do whilst the reform is making its way among them.[4]

Clearly, Gandhi was in no mood to wait for the "reformer's dream" to realize itself. Brayne had failed the villages of India because his solutions were unfeasible. In Gandhi's understanding, there was a need for a more immediate and expedient form of action which entailed thinking of village upliftment in the finite terms of what was within the "present means of the people". Taking Gandhi's criticism of Brayne, in 1929, into account, then, one can observe how his own sporadic efforts, beginning in 1935, were not so much geared towards village improvement as such; rather, they were geared towards bringing an element of immediate practicability within the ideal of improvement.

And yet, something set Gandhi's efforts in 1935 apart from what he had written in 1929. As I will demonstrate in my paper, Gandhi, in 1935, sought a more thoroughgoing account for the limitations of village life. If in 1929, Gandhi had disparaged Brayne's ideas, on the merit of his own knowledge of the limited means of villagers, in 1935, he sought to systematically engage with how the very drudgery of village-life itself imposed limits upon what villagers could do to improve upon their own condition. Indeed, now, in 1935, Gandhi emphasized how the villagers' continual life of labor in the village kept them from going beyond the perimeter of the village, or thinking beyond the means of what was immediately available to them in the village itself.

Gandhi shifted into Segaon, in June 1936, with the intention of observing how his own way of thinking about the ideal of village improvement would change through his experience of living within the finite means of a village. More significantly, he wished to observe, as I will suggest, how an experience of the limitations of village life would serve to transform his own way

of thinking in general. After all, if he had praised Mira Behn in July that year, he had done so because she had, without hesitation, allowed her very own personal notions of domestic architecture to be seasoned by her exposure to the circumstances of a village. He had praised her, in essence, for her impressionability.

What, then, in the light of Gandhi's interest in observing how circumstances left impressions upon thought, particularly upon thoughts about shaping space, to make of his concurrent investment in an inward space of withdrawal from external circumstances? This is a question that I will explore in some detail in my paper. I will examine how Gandhi had, in spite of his own solicitude towards new impressions, persevered, in the early months of his stay in Segaon, with his faith in an inner space of the *atman* or the spirit that was immune to external contingencies. Indeed, this other Gandhi who sought to remain immune from the world around himself is only too well known. Leela Gandhi, for instance, has built upon Partha Chatterjee's scholarship, to describe how Gandhi pursued and preached, in the name of *Ahimsa* or non violence, a form of absolute self-restraint or withdrawal from a world of external contingencies and enticements.[5] Gandhi, in essence, was no different from many revolutionaries in early twentieth-century India who pursued what Chatterjee has called the "dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual".[6] If the west could claim to have some superiority over the material domain, that is the "outside" world of economy, statecraft, science and technology, a few Indian revolutionaries promoted the inner domain of spirituality as the space of sovereignty from the outside and also as a preserve of cultural difference.[7] Gandhi, as Leela Gandhi writes about him, was one such revolutionary.

While I derive considerable inspiration from the work of Leela Gandhi and Partha Chatterjee, I wish to suggest that Gandhi's pursuit of an inner space of sovereignty, specifically in 1935 and 1936, cannot be read independently of his immediate external circumstances. While on the one hand, Gandhi may have generally nurtured a space of the interior that was immune to

receiving impressions from an outer, material domain of western supremacy, on the other hand, in 1936, he articulated this very inward space in the emergent terms and criteria of his desire to become affected by exterior circumstances. Indeed, as I will argue, it is possible to understand the manner in which Gandhi articulated his interest in an inner space of the spirit between 1935 and 1936, in the limiting terms and criteria of his concurrent interest in becoming affected by the limitations of village life.

Before I begin I would like to emphasize that there is much to criticize about Gandhi's interest in the village as a basic societal unit in India. Indeed, his very belief in the unity of interests among those who live in a village has already been examined and written about with some sensitivity.[8] However, if I write about Gandhi's fascination with the limitations of village life in the mid-1930s I do so because he appears, at the time, to have taken himself and his own fascination with villages, extraordinarily seriously. As I envisage, it helps to think along with Gandhi about the village in 1935 and 1936, so as to prepare the ground for a rigorous historical enquiry into the part he may have played at the time in Indian nationalist politics.

Village Sanitation: 1935–1936

In 1936, by the time Gandhi prepared to shift to Segaon from his home in Maganwadi, Wardha in west-central India, he had not defined, in absolute terms, what village improvement ought to be. Rather he merely expressed his interest in ascertaining how his own thoughts were imperfect. In March, roughly three months prior to settling down in Segaon, Gandhi had written a letter to the industrialist Jamnalal Bajaj (1884–1942), the owner of Maganwadi and the proprietor of the village of Segaon, titled "My Idea of Living in a Village".[9] In that letter, Gandhi observed somewhat solemnly "whatever defects there may be in my way of thinking will come to the surface on my living in a village".[10] In this section of the paper, then, I will consider why Gandhi may have believed that living in a village would affect or leave an impression upon his own thinking. Indeed, to understand the

nature of Gandhi's praise of Mira Behn's hut in Segaon later that year, it is necessary to pay attention to his then emergent understanding of how living in a village had implications on thinking as such.

Gandhi had, as I have already mentioned, criticized Brayne in 1929 for having promoted his own metropolitan impressions of village reform. Gandhi had been critical of *The Remaking of Village India* on the grounds that he himself, through his personal experiences, knew better than Brayne. However, by 1935, Gandhi did not so much speak about village improvement from the vantages of his own experiences. Rather, he sought to emphasize how the experience of a village itself would make village workers, or those metropolitans who volunteered to work for the betterment of villages, more aware of the limitations of rural life. Indeed, in 1935, even as he grew increasingly concerned about the lack of sanitation in India's villages and the prevalence of such antiquated, social practices as caste inequality, Gandhi was loathe to simply encourage village workers to foist sanitation and equality upon villagers. Rather, in his understanding, village workers could find the terms of sanitation and equality, and indeed, they would find the terms of village improvement only by being among the villagers. Consider, for instance, his letter to a village worker in the state of Gujarat in October that year:

> the best discipline for you is to settle down quietly and work away uninterruptedly for a year. A villager absorbed in his work has no time to go on friendly visits. We must try to emulate him. You must therefore make it a rule not to move out beyond a radius of ten miles. It is impossible to get under the skin of the villagers until one lives in their midst all the twenty-four hours for an unbroken period.[11]

Gandhi had sought to define the villager's life as one that necessarily involved staying rooted in the village. The villager, in Gandhi's understanding, remained "so absorbed in his work" that he did not have any "time to go on friendly visits". Village workers, then, could only begin to appreciate the quotidian, everyday practices of a villager, if they began to view the world

from the vantages of those who never went on friendly visits, and stayed confined, for "unbroken" periods within a ten-mile radius on account of being absorbed by work.

Gandhi's emphasis upon the drudgery of village-life appears to have stemmed, at the time, from what he had learnt from his own sporadic engagement with the village of Sindi, roughly a mile from Maganwadi. In March 1935, he had visited that village and had initially encouraged Mira Behn to take up sanitation work in that village.[12] He had himself volunteered to take up residence in that village, but eventually Mira Behn had done so in his stead.[13] If he emphasized the limitations of village life in early October that year, then, it is possible that he did so, on account of what he was beginning to learn from Mira Behn. Indeed, towards the end of October, he had even explicitly mentioned Sindi in his essay "Problems Confronting a Sanitary Worker". He observed in that essay:

> When faced with problems, human beings find out new ways; hence the English saying: necessity is the mother of invention… Let us take the example of Sindi... People there defecate publicly in their own courtyards. The neighbouring fields are surrounded by fences, so these cannot be used. No one would be prepared to go very far. The village population consists of labourers. How can the latter find the time to go to a distance? How far can the womenfolk go? If so, nothing need be said of children. Hence, as a last resort, nothing but courtyards remain for the people to make use of. Villagers are not accustomed to have a latrine in every household. Hence so long as there are no public latrines in fair numbers or people are not prepared to make their own, public roads will continue to be used as latrines. In fact, so long as every individual does not acquire a knowledge of sanitation and he does not put it into practice, the practice of using roads as latrines, despite its being unseemly, is perhaps the least harmful from the hygienic point of view and may be tolerated.[14]

While Gandhi himself had not taken up residence in Sindi, he had, perhaps building upon what Mira Behn may have told

him, been thinking about life in that village from the position of its residents who "did not find the time to go the distance", and also had their neighboring fields surrounded by fences. Clearly, people in Sindi were not so much prone to thoughtlessly making their own courtyards into latrines; rather, they did so out of necessity, as "a last resort". Indeed, given the circumstances of those living in Sindi, and their general lack of awareness of sanitation, Gandhi was even willing to go so far as to argue that using roads as latrines was "perhaps the least harmful from the hygienic point of view and may be tolerated".

This Gandhi, who sought to understand how circumstances forced the villagers to remain within the confines of the village and use roads as latrines, is vastly different from the Gandhi who had, in 1919, emphasized the dirtiness of India's villages. That year, in his article titled "Father of the World" in *Navajivan*, a monthly journal in the Gujarati language, Gandhi had observed:

> Many of our diseases originate from our latrines or from our custom of going to the fields for evacuation. Every house must have a latrine… If there is no latrine available, the rest turn their courtyard, lanes or houses into latrines, dirtying the place and poisoning the air… If anyone wants to evacuate in the open, it must be a distance of a mile from the village. There must be no habitation in its vicinity, nor any human traffic near by. The person must dig a hole and after using it must cover the faeces with earth. If all the earth that has been dug out is put back, the faeces will be properly covered. By taking this little trouble, we can observe an important rule of cleanliness. Sensible peasants may evacuate in their fields and obtain free manure. This is one rule.[15]

Gandhi, even as early as 1919, was clearly preoccupied with sanitation in village courtyards, lanes or houses. However, Gandhi certainly did not refer to the usage of roads or lanes as latrines, as a more hygienic practice in comparison to usage of the home or the courtyard as latrines. Rather this Gandhi could countenance nothing less than "sensible peasants", as a matter of rule, traveling a distance of a mile from the village.

Far from imposing a metropolitan sensibility of cleanliness upon those living in a village, the Gandhi of 1935 had sought to acknowledge how their usage of the courtyard and the road as latrines stemmed from a sensibility that arose in the concrete, material reality of their being situated, out of necessity, within a village. The limitations of the villagers, that is, their confinement within the bounds of the village arose on account of their being labourers who could not "find the time to go the distance". More significantly, it would appear that the Gandhi of 1935 sought to promote, in the light of the villagers' circumstances, their usage of the road as a latrine as a slight improvement over the practice of using the home or the courtyard. Indeed, Gandhi was already beginning to transform the exalted, metropolitan ideal of sanitation, into what could have been, for the denizens of Sindi, the more viable matter of opting for a slightly more sanitary practice than simply using the household.

If, then, in March 1936, Gandhi had suggested that the defects in his "way of thinking" would "come to the surface" on his living in a village, it is entirely possible that he said so because he was invested in exploring how the experience of being situated in a village for "an unbroken period", had the potential of suggesting its own, viable forms of thinking about sanitation. While in 1935, Gandhi had simply written about insanitation and the limitations of village life by projecting himself into the position of a denizen of Sindi, now, in 1936, it would appear that he sought to ground his own thinking, or at any rate sought to correct his own metropolitan ideas concerning sanitation, by finally living in a village. Having forgone the opportunity to stay in Sindi for a sustained period of time in 1935, he now sought, more purposefully, to think from the vantages of a villager's limitations in Segaon. It is in this context, then, that I will be discussing in the following section, his praise of Mira Behn's hut in Veroda, in July 1936. Before I consider Gandhi's description of that hut, however, I will provide a brief overview of Mira Behn's construction efforts in and around Segaon.

The Space of "Real-Ruralmindedness": Mira Behn's Hut

Mira Behn was quite a prolific builder. After shifting from Sindi to Segaon, towards the end of 1935, she built herself a hut in that village with external help from Mahar laborers. She subsequently built a second hut in Segaon; she built this hut for Gandhi.[16] This hut is today popularly known as *Adi Niwas* (Fig. 1). After Gandhi took up residence in this hut in June, Mira Behn

Fig. 1

shifted over to the nearby village of Veroda.[17] Here, in Veroda, she built herself a new hut with some external help. Shortly thereafter, she fell ill and Gandhi himself brought her back to Segaon, where she built a fourth hut.[18] Mira Behn eventually converted this hut, which she had initially built for herself, into what she called "a proper cottage for Bapu [Gandhi]".[19] Gandhi himself finally came to reside in this cottage. In her book, *Bapu Kuti,* the acclaimed journalist Rajni Bakshi has described how this very cottage affected a few Indian architects in 1987 (Figs. 2, 3). She observed:

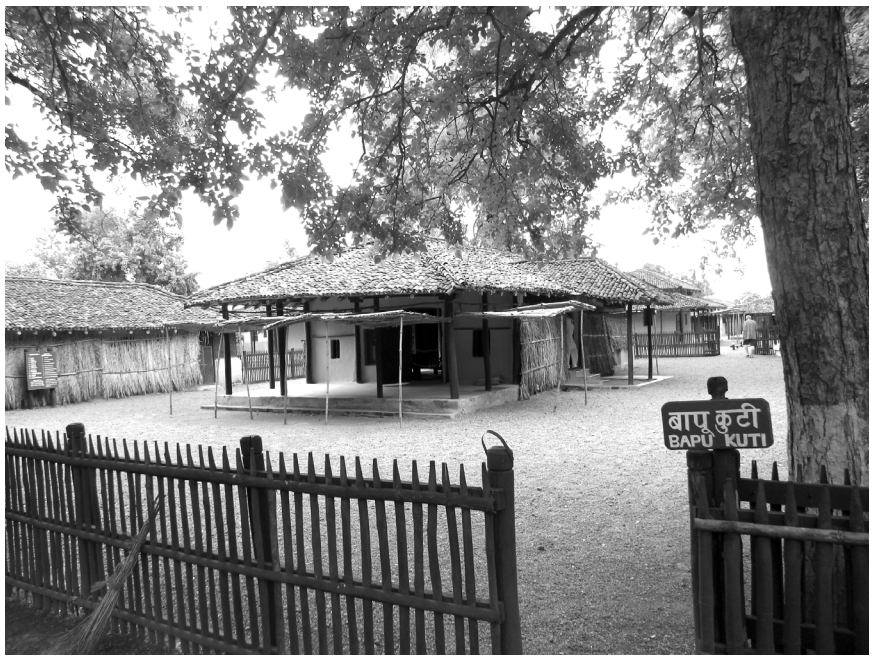

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

> In 1987, some of India's most reputed architects were gathered at the Bapu Kuti [Gandhi's hut]. All three men were seeing the Kuti for the first time. One just stared at it and despaired at the follies in his own design of buildings. Another turned poet and saw love manifest in the mud structure. The aesthetic and functional beauty of every little detail held them in awe.[20]

While Bakshi has written about the manner in which *Bapu Kuti* made a powerful impression upon architects in post-colonial India, I, for my part, wish to dwell on how Gandhi, in a time prior to the construction of that structure, had deemed Mira Behn's hut in Veroda as a measure of her own impressionability. I wish to emphasize, in particular, Gandhi's description of Mira Behn's hut in Veroda, in his conversation with Devadas, his youngest son, and Jairamdas Doulatram, a politician from the Sindh province towards the northwest of the subcontinent (Fig. 4. The image shows what remains of Mira Behn's hut at Veroda, nearer to Sushila Nayar's Samadhi; only the well remains of the hut at present).[21] This conversation, occurred in what is today known as *Adi Niwas,* in July 1936, roughly a month after Gandhi had shifted into Segaon. The conversation was duly noted by Gandhi's personal secretary Mahadev Desai (1892–1943). Gandhi had observed:

Fig. 4

I am very happy that you have come here, but, I hope, not to see this dignified hut of mine [what later came to be known as Adi Niwas]. I am responsible for little of the planning here, and I have given to it none of my art or my labour. But I wonder if you saw on your way Mirabehn's hut. It was worth while coming all the way to see her hut certainly. That is really and truly HER hut. This is a hut built FOR me, not MY hut. Here is her own hut, planned and built by herself (of course with other people's labour). But it is not merely a hut. It is a poem. I studied it in detail only yesterday, and I tell you I had tears of joy as I saw the villager's mentality about everything in it. You know I often have my quarrels with her, but let me tell you that no one from amongst us can claim to have the real rural-mindedness that she has. Did you study the position of her little bath-room and the inside of it? She has utilized every stone that the blasting of the underground rock in her well, made available to her. The seat for the bath is all one stone fixed to the ground. Next to the bathroom in the same little hut is the latrine. No commode or wooden plank or any brickwork. Just two beautiful stones, half buried in the ground, and with two halves of kerosene tins between the stones. Any villager can do this, but never does it. All the water naturally runs to carefully made beds for plants and vegetables… And now let us see the inside the hut—all mud and split bamboo and wattle of palm-branches. You note every little article in the hut and the place given to it. Her chula (fire) is all made with her own hands, and though she has learnt it from us no one can beat her in the art. Then see the bamboo mantelpiece… on which she keeps her earthen cooking utensils. Then see the little doorless windows and bamboo bookshelf and note the palms and peacocks over the windows, moulded in relief by herself. Also note her little kitchen and the carding room. The village where she works is about two to three furlongs from the hut. All the women and many of the men in the village know her, and the women confide to her many of their household secrets and look to her for advice and guidance…She looks like one of them.Well, if you have not studied her hut carefully I would like you to go there again on your way back.[22]

Gandhi, evidently, was emphasizing how Mira Behn had built a hut to stay rooted in the village of Veroda. What is fascinating, however, is how Mira Behn had built a hut for herself, with help from other people, in the manner of a person who was already rooted in that village. In Mira Behn's understanding, going strictly by Gandhi's description, the event of building a home for herself in a village was not distinct from the event of thinking like villagers who did not "find the time to go to a distance". Indeed, not only had Mira Behn already accepted the villagers' inability to travel outside the region of the village as a part of her own lot, she had also taken that inability as a cue to utilize "every stone that the blasting of the underground rock in her well made available to her", so as to build her bathroom. Similarly, she had not built her latrine out of brickwork or with a wooden plank, rather with two stones and the halves of kerosene tins that may have been immediately, exigently available to her in the village. And as if this was not enough, she had even resorted to using the waste water from the latrine to irrigate her carefully made bed of plants and vegetables. Mira Behn, in essence, had remained so committed to not venturing out of the village while building her home, that she had utilized, in the absence of material from outside the village, some of the waste that arose from the construction of a few portions of her home, to construct some of the other portions.

What Gandhi had called Mira Behn's "villager's mentality", then, could scarcely have been a measure of how fervently she had sought to conform to the building habits of her neighbors. Gandhi certainly did not praise Mira Behn's hut in Veroda, for its having been a demonstration of architectural mimicry. Rather, he saw her hut as evidence of her attempt at responding to the task of building in Segaon as somebody from the village ideally would from the vantages of his or her own experiences of the place, the way "any villager can… but never does it". It would appear, then, that Mira Behn's hut was poetry because it suggested how villagers always had a choice. They could choose to not be completely overwhelmed by their own inability to venture out of the village, and to make something productive out of that very

experience, the way Mira Behn had. They could, in essence, in the absence of a commode, perform the very viable task of burying two stones into the ground by their household and use the arrangement as a latrine. Indeed, even if the villagers remained incapable of going to a distance to relieve themselves, they could, as Mira Behn had demonstrated, with minimal effort, come up with a sanitary arrangement as a part of their home. Sanitation was not some exalted, impossible, metropolitan sensibility. Rather, one could think about sanitation through the very experience of being confined within a village.

What I am keen on emphasizing, however, is the manner in which Gandhi had chosen to speak about Mira Behn's attempts at making something productive out of the experience of being confined within a village, specifically in the context of her home. If, in the past, Gandhi had alluded to Mira Behn's attempts at making a sanguine impression, as a sanitation worker, upon the minds of those who lived in the village of Sindi, now he wrote more specifically about how her efforts at working for the denizens of Veroda in the terms of a villager's limitations, had made a sanguine impression on the way she thought for herself.[23] Indeed, now, in July 1936, Gandhi did not so much express an interest in the work Mira Behn may have been doing in a village; rather, he had carefully studied her hut in detail, and subsequently arrived at the lofty conclusion "no one from amongst us can claim to have the real rural-mindedness that she has". Evidently, Mira Behn was the apotheosis of "real-ruralmindedness" because she had so utterly and thoroughly become absorbed in thinking about village improvement from the vantages of her own experience of a villager's limitations, that she now even thought of an architecture for herself in the terms of those very limitations.

Gandhi had praised Mira Behn, then, for how she, far from merely working on the behalf of those living in Veroda, had permitted her very own sense of self to be affected and disproportioned by that very work. Gandhi had not so much celebrated Mira Behn's simplicity; rather, he celebrated her solicitude towards being affected by the project of living within

the simple means of a village. While Mira Behn may have "even looked like one of them [the villagers]", it was, ultimately, the manner in which she thought for herself, the way they ought to have, that had made such a profound impression on Gandhi.

In the next section of this paper, I will consider how Gandhi's praise of Mira Behn's impressionability could have possibly been consistent with his own efforts to stave off his own impressionability. How, in essence could Gandhi, on the one hand, praise Mira Behn's solicitude towards becoming affected, and on the other hand seek to preserve his own inward space of the spirit or the *atman*, from becoming affected? This is the question that I will be pursuing in some detail.

The Space of Inwardness: "Echoes of the Divine Music"

In 1936, Gandhi may have proceeded with the experiment of becoming a village thinker. Indeed, he may have sought to open himself up to becoming affected by the experience of being confined within the region of a village, so as to think about improvement and sanitation, from the vantages of the village itself. And yet, what calls for pause and some consideration is his continuing rootedness in an inviolate, inward space of the spirit. However much Gandhi may have been invested in going beyond his "own way of thinking", he appears, ultimately, to have persevered with his own, long-standing belief in the ascendancy of an inner domain of God, that is, a domain of withdrawal from all material necessities and sensations.

Consider, for instance, the manner in which he wrote, shortly before he shifted to Segaon, about God as a form of inner music. God, Gandhi observed, did not exist outside the body. One cannot look for exterior proof of God; rather "we must ever fail to perceive him through the senses, because He is beyond them. We can feel Him, if we will but withdraw ourselves from the senses".[24] Gandhi likened the feeling of God, then, to a divine music that continually occurred within oneself. "The divine music is incessantly going on within ourselves, but the loud senses

drown the delicate music which is unlike and infinitely superior to anything we can perceive or hear with our senses".[25] Similarly, after shifting to Segaon, on 11 July, Gandhi had written a letter to Vijaya N. Patel. "The atman", or the spirit, he mentioned in his letter, was itself beyond the sense organs of the body. Indeed, Gandhi even claimed that he experienced, "every moment", the presence of the atman, and therefore he could "occasionally catch the echoes of the divine music".[26]

Later, in August, Paula Lecler, a visiting American, and Y.S. Chen, a member of the Cotton Industry Commission of China, asked Gandhi at Segaon if he was happier being in the village, rather than outside of it.[27] Gandhi responded by saying "I cannot say, for my happiness is not dependent on external circumstances".[28] It came rather spontaneously to the man who had believed in an inner space of the self where the experience of the divine was by no means beholden to the senses, to repudiate external circumstances while talking about happiness. Indeed, even a month later, in September, when Gandhi briefly visited a hospital in the nearby town of Wardha, while recovering from malaria, he had made it a point to write a letter to a disciple mentioning that thinking of objects of sense, that is, the external world, was a delusion. When Gandhi suggested that he wrote the letter in a weakened, enfeebled state, he did so because he wanted to indicate how he still remained strong from the inside, strong enough, at any rate, to articulate himself well in writing.[29]

On the one hand, Gandhi had praised Mira Behn for having so utterly and thoroughly given herself over to the task of village improvement that she had fashioned her own personal space in the terms of the work at hand. She had fashioned her own personal space in the terms of the work of ascertaining how to make something productive out of the limited means of the village. Indeed Gandhi had admired Mira Behn's hut because she had conceived it while bearing in mind external circumstances, that is, the severely limiting conditions of those who lived in a village.

On the other hand, Gandhi himself, even as he stayed in Segaon, sought to inculcate a space of inwardness and exclusivity

from "external circumstances". Gandhi, in essence, had decreed from the vantages of this very inward space of the spirit or the *atman*, that thinking of objects of sense or the external world, was a delusion. Indeed this anterior, spiritual space of aloofness and withdrawal, unlike Mira Behn's physical space of the self, appears to have been inviolate. Gandhi's interior space of the atman, in essence, appears not to have been disproportioned by any change in his thinking, or, for that matter, by any change in his state of health.

Gandhi's invocation of a secure, inviolate space of inwardness, in 1936, is understandable in some respects. He had, after all, mentioned a similar space ten years earlier, in a sermon he gave on the *Bhagavad Gita* at his Satyagraha Ashram, in the city of Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat. In that sermon, he had mentioned how the intellect of people could be secure if they withdrew their senses from objects the way a tortoise draws its limbs in from every side. He suggested:

> The man who holds in his senses to prevent them from going out to their objects, as the tortoise draws in his limbs and holds them as if under a shield, has an intellect which is steadfast. Only that man who voluntarily holds in his senses may be known as completely absorbed in God. When our senses seem to move out of our control, we should think of the tortoise. The objects of the senses are like pebbles. If we hold in the senses, the pebbles will not hurt, that is, if we hold under control our hands, our feet, our eyes, and so on.[30]

In so far as one attaches any amount of importance to Gandhi's emphasis on a voluntary withdrawal from the sensorial world in 1926, then it is only appropriate to say that he was, in 1936, revisiting a place that he had already long since been with familiar with. The place into which the tortoise withdrew its limbs in 1926 was, in essence, the place of "happiness" which was "not dependent on external circumstances". It seems only appropriate to suggest that Gandhi had not changed one whit over the course of the early days of his stay in Segaon. However much he may

have wished to go beyond his "own way of thinking", he remained, in the ultimate analysis, mired within it.

And yet, a closer reading of Gandhi's utterances in 1936 would suggest that his very desire to go beyond his "own way of thinking", had, to some degree, disproportioned his long-standing comprehension of an inner, inviolate space of the spirit or the atman. While there certainly is no way of getting into Gandhi's head and knowing precisely how he thought in 1936, one cannot but help observe how he, at the time, had articulated his ideas about an inner space of God, or the spirit, using the very terms and criteria of his then emerging inclination to open up his own thinking to becoming affected. Consider, for instance, how, in 1926, Gandhi had described God purely as the experience of holding one's senses in control; Gandhi's God, in 1926, had not so much been an inchoate feeling, or, for that matter, a feeling of a thing. In 1926, God was simply the repudiation of one's senses. God was a form of negation. In 1936, however, God could be perceived and affirmed as a "delicate music". Admittedly, "the loud senses" did drown out "the delicate music". And yet, God was not merely only the negation of one's senses or the repudiation of one's ability to perceive; rather, one repudiated one's senses in order to open oneself up to the positive experience of a divine music. One repudiated one's senses, in essence, to prepare oneself to receive an impression of divine music. "We can feel Him," Gandhi had noted, "if we will but withdraw ourselves from the senses".

What demands further scrutiny, then, is the manner in which Gandhi's desire to become impressionable, saturated his prose in 1936. That year, Gandhi may have spoken about an inviolate space of inwardness and exclusivity from "external circumstances". He may have even suggested, from the vantages of this very inward space of the spirit or the *atman*, that thinking of objects of sense or the external world was a delusion. And yet, it would appear that he had conceived this very inward space in the theatrical terms and criteria of his desire to experience and to become affected by exterior circumstances. While one cannot

know precisely how Gandhi thought in 1936, one can nevertheless speculate about the manner in which his own impressionability may have instilled an element of concreteness into his imaginings of an inner space of the spirit or the *atman*.

Conclusions

In his 1969 booklet *Sevagram: Gandhi's Ashram and Other Institutions in Wardha,* Vishweshwar Rao wrote about how, within a few months after Gandhi took up residence in Segaon, the settlement had developed into a regular Ashram or hermitage. According to Rao, Gandhi did not necessarily intend to establish an Ashram in the village of Segaon or what eventually came to be known as Sewagram, on the lines of his previous Ashram (established 1915) in the city of Ahmedabad. Rather, Gandhi, according to Rao:

> was anxious that the entire village and its surroundings should become his Ashram. Except building huts for his own party, he did not like to set up an independent Ashram. But he planned in such a way that the homes that he built for the Ashramites [those who lived with him in Segaon] would serve as a model of what its surrounding might or should become…. Gandhiji was anxious that life in the Ashram should demonstrate in practice a simple, clean and scientific organization of the necessary business of living.[31]

In Rao's account, Gandhi clearly had sought to make an impression on the village around his own home. After all, he "planned in such a way that the homes that he built for the Ashramites would serve as a model of what its surrounding might or should become". Indeed Gandhi had wished to practice simplicity, so as to make a demonstration of Ashram-life to those who lived around the Ashram.

In my essay, then, I have written about a time prior to the emergence of Segaon as an Ashram. I have written about a time when Gandhi, far from merely aspiring to make an impression on others, had himself also aspired to become impressionable.

Indeed, as I have argued, he did not so much praise Mira Behn's hut in Veroda for its merely having been an outward expression of her simplicity; rather, he had seen it as a measure how affected her mind had become by the task of serving those who lived simply, within the means of Veroda. More significantly, I have considered how Gandhi's impressionability, particularly in the context of such themes as village improvement and a villager's limitations, came to affect the manner in which he conceived an inviolate space of his interior self that was, arguably, immune to becoming impressionable.

What drove Gandhi towards becoming affected by a villager's limitations? Did Gandhi's debates at the time with Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), on the caste system in India, have some bearing on his efforts at village improvement? What was the political fallout, at the Indian national level, of the early months of Gandhi's stay in the village of Segaon? What were Mira Behn's own impressions about her time in Veroda and Segaon? More significantly, what were the impressions of those who lived in Segaon and had to submit to Gandhi's ideal of village improvement?[32] And finally, what kind of an impression has Mira Behn's impressionability made upon the practice of architecture in post-colonial India? These are questions that I aspire to answer in later studies.

Notes

[2] Mira Behn, who was previously known as Madeline Slade, had built a sum total of four huts in and around Segaon. She had herself initially stayed at Segaon, beginning some time in November 1935, and commissioned the construction of a hut for herself in that village. For more information on this hut, refer to Madeline Slade, *The Spirit's Pilgrimage* (London: Lowe and Brydon, 1960),197. Mira Behn subsequently built a hut for Gandhi in Segaon (this hut is known today as *Adi Niwas*). *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* Vol. 62 (Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, 1958–1982), 380. She then built a hut for herself in Veroda. Slade, 205. Mira Behn subsequently returned to live in Segaon and built herself another hut. *CWMG* 64: 391. Mira Behn finally converted this hut into a proper cottage for Gandhi. It is this cottage that is today popularly known in India as *Bapu Kuti*. Slade, 209.

[3] *Young India* 14 Nov. 1929, *CWMG* 42: 147. I have, in the past, briefly been through Brayne's book. F.L. Brayne, *Remaking of Village India* (London: H. *Milford*,1929).

[4] *Young India* 14 Nov. 1929, *CWMG* 42: 147.

[5] Leela Gandhi, "Concerning Violence: The Limits and Circulations of Gandhian 'Ahisma' or Passive Resistance", *Cultural Critique*, No. 35 (Winter, 1996–1997), 107–108.

[6] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

[7] Chatterjee, 6.

[8] For a succinct description of how Gandhi's approach towards villages changed over a period of time, refer to Surinder S. Jodhka, "Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 37, No. 32 (10–16 Aug. 2002), 3343–3353.

[9] The letter titled "My Idea of Living in a Village" was sent on 19 March 1936, *CWMG* 62: 272. On 5 March 1936, Gandhi had already made a speech, in which he mentioned "Even I have not been able to explain my ideas [concerning village work] fully. Our work has just begun. It is not even a year since it started. We do not have enough experience to serve the people. I myself have not been able to settle down in a village so far." *Gandhi Sewa Sangh ke Dwitiya Adhiveshan (Savli)ka Vivaran*, *CWMG* 62: 238.

[10] *CWMG* 62: 272.

[11] Harijan, 12 Oct. 1935 *CWMG* 62: 22–23.

[12] Refer to "Advice to Villagers" dated sometime before 14 March 1935, *CWMG*

60: 299. Mira Behn would go for walks from Maganwadi, and at the time came across Sindi. She was upset over the condition of the village and mentioned it to Gandhi, who prompted her to take up work there. Slade, 192. Gandhi must have visited Sindi sometime after Mira Behn began her work there.

[13] It is not entirely clear from Mira Behn's account, as to when Gandhi had decided to go and stay in Sindi. Slade, 194. However, Gandhi had written a letter to Narandas Gandhi on 20 October, 1935. He wrote "She [Mira Behn} has now gone to live in Sindi." *CWMG* 62: 54.

[14] "Problems Confronting a Sanitary Worker," *Harijan*, 27 Oct. 1935, *CWMG* 62: 71.

[15] *Navajivan,* 2 Nov. 1919, *CWMG* 16: 273.

[16] It appears that Mira Behn was already in Segaon by 29 November,1935, when Gandhi had written a letter to her. *CWMG* 62: 144.

[17] Slade, 205.

[18] *CWMG* 64: 391.

[19] Slade, 209.

[20] Rajni Bakshi, *Bapu Kuti: Journey on Discovery of Gandhi* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), 13–14.

[21] In my dissertation, I had not identified the hut Gandhi talked about, as the one Mira Behn had built in Veroda. Rather, I wrote about what came to be known later as *Bapu Kuti*. I made the mistake at the time, owing to the manner in which Gandhi referred to Mira Behn's hut. He spoke of it as if it were very close to where he sat. He sat in the hut that is now known as *Adi Niwas*. After a recent, meticulous examination of the Gandhi archive, I came to learn that Gandhi spoke about the hut in Veroda, and not what came to be known as *Bapu Kuti* (which had not been built at the time). To read my description of *Bapu Kuti* refer to Venugopal Maddipati, "Selfsame Spaces: Gandhi, Architecture and Allusions" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2011), 32–81.

[22] This is an excerpt from "Talk with Jairamdas Doulatram and Devdas Gandhi" dated sometime before 18 July 1936. It was noted by Mahadev Desai in his "Weekly Letter". *CWMG*, 63: 151–152. I also wish to mention that at this time I have not procured images of Mira Behn's cottage at Veroda. I have visited Wardha twice, and yet, I have not been able to locate Veroda. I am given to understand now that the name of the village may have changed and for that reason, does not appear on maps.

[23] Gandhi had written about how those who lived in Sindi had remained indif-

ferent to the project of sanitation. Mira Behn had, "as a last resort", gone to live in Sindi, presumably to make an impression upon its denizens. *Harijan*, 27 Oct. 1935, *CWMG* 62: 71.

[24] *Harijan*, 13 June 1936, *CWMG* 63: 58.

[25] Ibid.

[26] *CWMG* 63: 139.

[27] *Harijan*, Before 8 August 1936, *CWMG* 63: 206.

[28] Ibid.

[29] I am reproducing some portions of the letter Gandhi wrote to Jugal Kishore Birla for reference. Gandhi wrote: "I was about to have an attack of fever when your letter of 26th August reached me. I am now free from fever but am still confined to the hospital bed. Even then I should write to you. Thinking on objects of sense is a delusion." From "Letter to Jugalkishore Birla", 7 Sept. 1936, CWMG 63: 267.

[30] From "Discourses on the *Gita*, as given at the Satyagraha Ashram, Ahmedabad, during morning prayers on 31 March 1926, *CWMG* 32:130.

[31] R. Vishweshwar Rao, *Sevagram: Gandhiji's Ashram and Other Institutions in Wardha* (Sevagram: Sevagram Ashram Pratishthan Publication: 1969), 4 and 9.

[32] Of the 1,550 acres of village land in Segaon, 220 were owned by its revenue collectors (one of whom was Gandhi's disciple, the industrialist Jamnalal Bajaj). The rest of the land was divided among sixty small landholders. Mark Thompson, *Gandhi and His Ashrams* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1993), 188. In his book *Mira Behn, Gandhiji's Daughter Disciple*, Krishna Murti Gupta refers to the sixty landowners as "23 Gonds, 22 Kunbis and Marathas". (Himalaya Sangh, 1992), 126.

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