



In the 20th century, Bombay experienced significant political and social change. The city survived a plague and forsworn foreign goods in favour of traditional Indian cloth. National leaders held the first session of the Indian National Congress and launched nationwide satyagrahas. But despite the intellectual awakening in the city, the scrutiny and obstacles faced by women remained unchanged at large, and the practice of ostracising women lingered insidiously.

This was the atmosphere in which poet, journalist and social reformer Shri Behramji Malabari, moved by the plight of the Hindu women in society, worked tirelessly to abolish child marriages, enforce widowhood and raise the age of consent (Zompa 2022). His contemporary, Diwan Dayaram Gidumal, was a scrupulously just man who was passionate about the cause of education and felt similarly about the life lived by Indian women (Balouch 2015). Malabari and Gidumal, together, established the Seva Sadan Society in Mumbai to offer support to women. Their vision was for women to live comfortably, avail of educational opportunities, be a part of a large community, train in industry and achieve financial and social autonomy. Since its establishment on 11th July 1908 (Fernandes 2020), Seva Sadan has taken several crucial and ingenious steps in the direction of women's empowerment.

In 1914, the Pandita Ramabai Navrange Teachers Training College was established and run by the organisation for over a century. Seva Sadan also began conducting classes at home in Marathi literacy for women who couldn't join educational institutes. In 1924, lessons in industry began. There were over 60 students in that year alone. They offered monetary help to those who could not pay school fees. The training college also had an impressive attendance of over 100 teachers (The Times of India 1924). In 1944, a primary school in the Marathi medium was established and provided quality education, followed by a Marathi medium high school in 1960. Seva Sadan also introduced vocational training in fields such as sewing, typing and shorthand in the 1970s. In 2000, a self-financed pre-primary school was inaugurated ("Our Journey" Seva Sadan).

Even today, Seva Sadan provides affordable, high-quality education that extends beyond the curriculum and aims at the professional and personal development of students across fields like academic, social, creative and digital fields (English Education). The organisation conducts various workshops, competitions and summer camps and collaborates with many other organisations to enable residents to showcase their talent through performances at the NCPA and the Kala Ghoda Festival of Performing Arts. The residents have also performed at the Gateway of India to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Indian Air Force ("Beyond Academics" Seva Sadan).

In the 1940s, Seva Sadan initiated tiffin services to employ the women residing there and offer home-cooked healthy food within the locality. In the 1950s, they introduced laundry services run by the residents. In 2002, a cafe named Aahaar was inaugurated and run by the residents. The same space is now rented by various cafes ("Our Journey" Seva Sadan). The Seva Sadan Society is also committed to building communities. Its philanthropy extends beyond its residents and includes donating food, clothes, shoes, umbrellas and caps to the underprivileged. In 1914, Seva Sadan donated sweets to the Marine Lines War Hospital (The Times of India, 1922).

Seva Sadan is also deeply committed to raising independent and financially aware citizens. To achieve this, they teach vocational skills such as grooming, sewing, tailoring and baking ("Skill Development"). In the past, other skills have included embroidery, laundry and the culinary arts (The Times of India, 1924). Seva Sadan also supports the



physical and mental well-being of the residents with regular check-ups with physicians, nutritional meal plans and regular meetings with counsellors (“A Place They Call Home” Seva Sadan).

Seva Sadan lives on today, with a sprawling campus including its hostels, various schools with science and computer laboratories, a studio, a gallery and the Malabari Memorial Hall erected in remembrance of the founder in 1924 and inaugurated by the then Governor Sir Leslie Wilson and Lady Wilson. It was restored in 2020 by Brinda Somaya and Nandini Sampat with a commitment to maintaining its authenticity by retaining the original construction styles and similar materials. Seva Sadan won the Award of Merit at the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation in 2020 (Fernandes 2020).



Before the Seva Sadan was established, the then Viceroy wrote to Malabari assuring him of his and the Queen's appreciation, stating that they wished "every success to an undertaking which rests entirely on Indian initiative and organisation, and which should do so much to turn out well-trained teachers and advisors to ladies of position" (The Times of India 1910). The Seva Sadan has continued to turn out well-trained women, empowered to make their way in society, many of whom return to Seva Sadan as professionals who want to give back to the organisation which has raised them. Seva Sadan has provided refuge to 10,000 girls, educated 40,000 students and set 2,500 women on the path of self-reliance ("Impacting Lives" Seva Sadan). Rial Gawande from the Seva Sadan Society attributes their huge social impact to the relentless efforts taken by all the members of the society and their hard work (Gawande 2023).

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