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# Gone Native, But Not As We Know It

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*A narrative history reminds us of the exceptional Westerners who, during the high noon of Empire, went against the tide to engage with India and fight for the country's freedom.*

Throughout the long period of India's colonisation, many Britons arrived on its shores seeking opportunities for personal enrichment. Distinct from such self-serving sojourners, there was also a select band of Westerners who looked beyond narrow interests. Ramachandra Guha's *Rebels Against the Raj* narrates the stories of seven such individuals who sought to engage with India on its own terms and fought for its right to self-determination and freedom.

Perhaps to make his task manageable, Guha adduces rather stringent criteria for inclusion in the volume: "Detention in British India (or externment from British India) is a sine qua non for inclusion here" (xvii). As the author himself points out, many consequential individuals do not make the cut, like, for instance, C.F. Andrews, who spent a lifetime ceaselessly working for India and the welfare of indentured Indians across the colonised globe, earning him the epithet Deenabandhu. Others exemplars include the remarkable and colourful Quaker Reginald Reynolds, who campaigned for India's freedom in the metropole.

The individuals portrayed in *Rebels Against the Raj* are the Irish socialist and suffragette turned Theosophist, Annie Besant (1847-1933); the newspaper editor Benjamin Guy Horniman (1873-1948); the American Quaker missionary turned social reformer Samuel Evans 'Satyanand' Stokes (1882-1946) who worked in present-day Himachal Pradesh; Gandhi's disciple Madeleine Slade (1892-1982) who was given the Indian name of Mirabehn; communist turned right-winger Philip Spratt (1902-1971); American missionary turned Gandhian constructive worker Ralph Richard 'Dick' Keithahn (1898-1984); and the teacher turned Gandhian constructive worker and environmentalist in present-day Uttarakhand, Catherine Mary Heilemann, better known as Saralabehn (1901-1982). Instead of summarising these varied and fascinating lives here, I will discern broad themes and patterns.

> Western advocates for India were few and far between. In a general sense, the British, as with later-day Americans, were democrats at home and imperialists abroad.

The rebels arrived in India during the height of the Empire over a period of four decades, bookended by Annie Besant in 1893 and Saralabehn in 1932. At this time, British attitudes toward racism towards subject peoples had hardened. Western advocates for India were few and far between. In a general sense, the British, as with later-day Americans, were democrats at home and imperialists abroad. We may recall that when Annie Besant's mentor, the radical political activist and atheist Charles Bradlaugh, died in 1891, amongst the thousands of English mourners at his funeral was a young Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi was unimpressed by atheism but he recognised that Bradlaugh was that rare Englishman who championed India's cause.

Remarkably, the seven rebels belong to a select group which refused to live by a dictum that discriminated against those who resided east of the Suez. Their lives followed varied trajectories that brought them to India. If Besant arrived as a champion of the strange cult of Theosophy, Spratt came a few decades later with the explicit remit of engineering a proletarian revolution. While Mira's affinity with India was wholly owed to her obsession with the persona of Gandhi, the Americans Stokes and Keithahn came as missionaries. In contrast, Horniman and Saralabehn arrived with the more prosaic objective of seeking employment.

## Becoming Indian

Notwithstanding these different personal arcs and their widely different sensibilities, once in India, all converged on a desire for the political and social emancipation of their adopted homeland. While most Westerners held themselves apart from Indian society and indulged in daily acts of casual racism, the rebels distinguished themselves through serious and dogged attempts to Indianise themselves in diet, habit, and language.

> In 1919, Horniman was also the lone Englishman present amidst a sea of people at a landmark protest meeting in Bombay against the Rowlatt acts.

For instance, Horniman identified himself with the protests against the partition of Bengal in 1905 by the extraordinary act of walking "the streets of Calcutta barefoot, dressed in a white dhoti and kurta and chadder like an Indian patriot" (55). In 1919, Horniman was also the lone Englishman present amidst a sea of people at a landmark protest meeting in Bombay against the Rowlatt acts. If the adoption of Indian clothing was scandalous to the colonial mind, a white person wearing khadi was beyond the pale. During the Civil Disobedience campaign of the 1930s, Englishmen who dared to wear a khadi cap in public were assaulted by the police. Stokes and Spratt went further in their assimilation by marrying Indian women. Guha also recounts a charming anecdote of Saralabehn exclaiming "*Bap re Bap*" in Hindi instead of "Oh, my God" when she slipped and fell.

Of the seven, Besant was the only rebel to hold a prominent political position. This fact captures the transformation of Indian politics whereby an era of relative placidity rapidly gave way to mass political action engineered by a man who looms large over this volume - Mahatma Gandhi. With the growth and maturation of Indian nationalism, it was no longer feasible for a Besant or an A.O. Hume to play a key role in Indian public life.

> The later arrivals - Keithahn, Mira, and Sarala - were deferential to Gandhi and were fully committed to his ideals, including the significance of constructive work.

Indeed, from then on, all Westerners involved could be classified as followers, sympathisers, or opponents of Gandhi. We can distinguish between the attitudes of those who began working in India before Gandhi's return in 1915 and those who arrived after he had firmly established himself in Indian public life. Besant's trenchant criticism of Gandhi was prompted by a personal animus owing to her being superseded in short order. Stokes' disagreements with Gandhi were not personal but arose out of his political understanding. In contrast, the later arrivals - Keithahn, Mira, and Sarala - were deferential to Gandhi and were fully committed to his ideals, including the significance of constructive work.

## Life under the Raj

In identifying with Indians and going against their own societies, the rebels faced an extraordinary range of challenges. Any Westerner arguing for Indian freedom was subjected to constant monitoring and surveillance. Imprisonment or deportation was commonly deployed against those who asked inconvenient questions. If prison was an ordeal, deportation was worse. The deportee was denied the satisfaction of having gone to gaol for a higher cause and faced the psychological trauma of being forcibly wrenched from the life he had built in India.

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When the fearless Horniman published some of the earliest reports on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in his newspaper *The Bombay Chronicle*, panicky officials decided to deport him immediately. As Guha notes, Horniman was given all of thirty minutes to pack his belongings and leave India. This precipitous expulsion was owed to "the greatest difficulty in securing passage accommodation," which was solved by officials in Bombay by usurping the reservation of their own attorney general who had planned to travel home to England.

In 1930, when district officials evinced displeasure at Keithahn hosting the anticolonial Quaker Reynolds, his own Mission peremptorily withdrew him from India! While Keithahn returned a few years later after a long wrangle, in 1944 he was charged with violating the conditions of his re-entry, which included refraining from politics. Keithahn's response captures the essence of the moral struggle that he and like-minded Westerners were waging at great personal cost:

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I have never taken any active part in politics. But I have not closed my ears or my mind to all that has taken place around me. I have never felt that as a worker under Christ, the Prince of Peace, in India I should do nothing to understand the people and their burdens. ... I believe that it is my duty not as a political agitator, but as a constructive worker, in the village, to help in the solution of the tremendous problem of Indian freedom. That is the whole of my outlook and purpose without any addition or substraction from the truth. ... If I have to pay a price for it I shall gladly do so knowing that I have done nothing except carry out ... my Christian duty to the country of my adoption.
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Inevitably, Keithahn was once again expelled from India. We may note that missions and churches were closely aligned with the colonial regime and men like Keithahn and Stokes had to walk out in order to heed their conscience.

> The personal toll exacted by their spirit of rebellion went beyond material concerns […] Their commitment to India exacted a cruel toll on matters of the heart as well.

Working under such hostile circumstances, many of the rebels faced serious difficulties. "Horniman's purse was ever notoriously empty" (233) and an indigent Spratt did not even have enough money to buy a new pair of glasses. The personal toll exacted by their spirit of rebellion went beyond material concerns. In an age when international travel was rare and expensive, by throwing their lot with India they had to forsake the moorings and comfort afforded by friends and family they left behind.

Their commitment to India exacted a cruel toll on matters of the heart as well. In keeping with the mores of the times, Horniman remained silent about his homosexuality. Mira's love for the revolutionary Prithvi Singh went unrequited, whereas Keithahn's marriage to his beloved Mildred did not survive the demands of a life of rural service.

## Political Insights

Familiar with both the West and India, inevitably the rebels thought about India's role in global politics. In this regard, the ideologically actuated Spratt lacked insight and nuance. If his abandonment of communism was justifiable in light of the depredations of the Stalinist era, Spratt's shrill advocacy for a complete alignment with the United States during the Cold War failed to recognise that such subservience was inconsistent with the basic tenets of Indian nationalism. In contrast, the spiritually inclined Stokes comes across as unusually astute and perceptive. Indeed, contemporary partisans of the British Empire should be reminded of what Stokes wrote in 1921:

"... so far as the past is concerned, if gratitude needs expression, it is for the British Nation to express it to India, because it was from the exploited millions of the early Company Days, that those aggregates of Capital came into being in England which made possible the Mechanical Revolution and subsequent British greatness." (100)

In 1939, while recognising that all parties to the impending global war wanted to perpetuate the exploitation of colonies, the Quaker Stokes nevertheless argued that it was the *apaddharma* - an exceptional measure during times of crises - of the Congress leadership to align with the British against the Nazis.

Unlike most of his colleagues in the Congress, Gandhi paid attention to both ending India's colonisation as well as the harder challenge of 'constructive work' to address the social and economic problems of the times. Amongst the rebels, Keithahn, Saralabehn, and Mirabehn devoted themselves to Gandhian constructive work. In the 1920s, independent of Gandhi, Stokes had campaigned for the abolition of the practice of *begar* or forced labour in the hills around Kotgarh and also pioneered apple cultivation in the region.

> Mira and Sarala were also amongst the earliest to identify the nexus between India's economic model and the destruction of the majestic Himalayan forests.

If their convictions led the rebels to fight against British control of Indian affairs, they were not chary of addressing India's deep failings or criticising 'fellow' Indians and the government of independent India when warranted. Mira was perspicacious in decrying "the orthodox Gandhian cult of today" (393) as well as the Nehruvian state's headlong rush to industrialise while ignoring the environmental degradation it entailed. Along with Keithahn, Mira was exercised by the question of soil fertility. Mira and Sarala were also amongst the earliest to identify the nexus between India's economic model and the destruction of the majestic Himalayan forests. Their environmental legacy is too significant to detail here but it suffices to note that through the Lakshmi Ashram that she founded, Saralabehn proved to be the rebel with the most enduring legacy. The women that she trained played a vital role in the well-known Chipko movement, about which Guha has himself written a pioneering history.

## Conclusion

Much like Guha's other volumes, *Rebels Against the Raj* is written in a clear and engaging style. The author succeeds in tackling the challenge of writing a joint portrait of seven distinct lives. The other distinguishing feature of the volume is the impressive range of archival and published material that has been diligently sourced and mined to construct the life stories of these lesser-known figures.

For instance, Keithahn's own memoir, *Pilgrimage in India: An Autobiographical Fragment*, tells us very little, and *Rebels Against the Raj* contains the only extant biographical portrait.

In hewing to the arc of biographical narrative, Guha privileges narration over analysis. However, given the very diverse set of lives he chronicles, one wishes for a deeper engagement with a number of questions that arise from a joint portrait. For instance, it would have been fruitful to examine why these figures appear in their time and not earlier.

> It is apt that this homage to Western fighters for India's freedom is published at a time when many nations, India included, have turned inward and insular.

The idea of writing on *Rebels Against the Raj* arose in the context of Guha's biography of Verrier Elwin published two decades ago. However, it is apt that this homage to Western fighters for India's freedom is published at a time when many nations, India included, have turned inward and insular. Many in the West are doubling down instead of acknowledging the violent imperial pasts of their nations. Large numbers of Indians believe that we have nothing to learn from the rest of the world. But as Stokes said: "No culture is worth striving for which is grounded in selfishness. No nationalism is worth straining for that does not stretch beyond the interests of one's race so as to include the interests of all humanity." (93)

At a time when the memory of the struggle for freedom is receding from Indian minds, *Rebels Against the Raj* does well to remind us of these exceptional individuals. In fighting for India, the rebels rejected the norms of their societies and trod on the difficult path of truth and justice. We owe them our remembrance.

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