

# STILL SPEAKING TO INDIANS TODAY

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*If Annie Besant promoted the emancipation of women in a deeply patriarchal society, B.G. Horniman campaigned tirelessly for the freedom of the press. These are two of the seven “brave renegades” Ramachandra Guha profiles in his new book, Rebels against the Raj: Western Fighters for India’s Freedom. What unites them, writes Guha, is the courage they displayed in their personal lives, the depth of their commitment, and the timelessness of what they lived and struggled for. An excerpt:*

In my country, the rise of nativism and xenophobia in recent decades has been both immense and intense. National and especially religious parochialism is rife. ‘Garv se kaho Hindu ho’—Proclaim with Pride that you are a Hindu—such is the leitmotif that has accompanied the rise to power of the political movement known as Hindutva. Hindus, it is now said, are destined to be the world’s Vishwa Guru, teachers to the rest of humanity. They have apparently nothing to learn from or gain from the world in return. Although this book has not been written for the nativists and xenophobes, I hope that some members of that tribe might read it too. For here are seven quite remarkable individuals, all foreign-born, all white-skinned, who identified so completely with Indian aspirations. In the course of fighting non-violently for India’s liberation from colonial rule, all were interned or deported by the British. Yet it is not merely as ‘freedom-fighters’ that we should remember them. Quite apart from what they did in the sphere of politics, they each enriched and enhanced the life of the Indian nation in so many different ways.

Let us briefly rehearse their achievements. Annie Besant promoted the emancipation of women in a deeply patriarchal society. She co-founded one of the country’s best-known universities, and helped focus scholarly attention on the culture and civilization of ancient India. B. G. Horniman ran one of the finest and bravest newspapers in India; promoted and encouraged young journalists; and campaigned tirelessly for the freedom of the press. Samuel, later Satyanand, Stokes helped abolish forced labour in the hills before laying the foundations of a horticultural industry that has sustained the economy of the state of Himachal Pradesh for many decades now. Madeline Slade, later Mira Behn, wrote pioneering environmental tracts and, by influencing the making of Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi*, made the Mahatma’s ideas of non-violence and inter-faith harmony once more known around the world. Philip Spratt fought for the rights of workers before campaigning against the licence-permit-licence-raj that strangulated the Indian economy. Richard Ralph Keithahn helped found a rural university as well as a charitable hospital, and cultivated dignity and self-reliance among the oppressed. Catherine Mary Heilemann, later Sarala Behn, established a pioneering girls’ school in one of the most backward regions of India, training and nurturing several generations of social workers, some of whom went on to lead that most celebrated of environmental movements, the Chipko Andolan.

Of my seven rebels, two, Besant and Stokes, died when the British still ruled India, while a third, Horniman, died shortly after the British left. The four who lived on continued to struggle nobly for the values and ideals they cherished. Under colonial rule they had fought for India’s freedom; now that this had been achieved, they held the government of the day to account. Where lesser, or more insecure, people with white skins might seek to prove their ‘Indian-ness’ through fervent declarations of loyalty to the new nation, and sided with the State or the ruling Congress Party, these brave renegades stayed true to higher, universal, ideals.

Till she left for Europe in 1959, Mira worked for rural renewal and environmental sustainability in India. Later, from her home in the Vienna Woods, she scolded her fellow Gandhians for jingoistically following the Government line in the country’s dispute with China. Through the

1950s and 1960s, Spratt wrote and spoke against the creeping centralisation of political power, against the Indian State's denial of freedom to entrepreneurs, its curbs on individual liberty, and its attacks on the federal structure of the Indian Union. Through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Sarala devoted her energies and her intellect to empowering village women, while warning against the environmental consequences of consumerism and industrialism. All through these decades, Keithahn, in deepest South India, was working as tirelessly as Sarala in the Himalaya. Some of their concerns overlapped—village self-sufficiency and ecological renewal, for example—while others diverged, with Sarala focusing more on inequalities of gender and Keithahn more on inequalities of class.

Had Besant, Stokes and Horniman lived in independent India they would have surely followed the same sort of trajectory too. Besant might have campaigned to stop violence against women; Horniman against attacks on the press and sexual minorities; Stokes against aggressive and chauvinistic tendencies in his adopted Hindu faith. Like Mira, Sarala, Keithahn and Spratt, they would have been active conscience-keepers rather than unthinking nationalists in an India which had freed itself of British rule but whose people were still constrained by myriad forms of unfreedom.

These individuals came to India at different points of time, from widely varying backgrounds and with widely varying motivations. Once here, they lived in different parts of the country, and pursued different callings and obsessions. What unites them was, first, the courage and fearlessness they displayed in their personal lives; second, the depth and duration of their commitment to their new homeland; and third, the contemporaneity, indeed, timelessness, of what they lived and struggled for. So many years after the last of these rebels passed on, what they did and what they said still speaks to Indians today.

If only we could listen.

*Excerpted with permission from Penguin Random House*

### Our code of editorial values

A new form of 'Gandhian' democratic socialism powered by cooperative economic enterprises is required

**END**

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