

Fischer-Tiné, Harald: *Shyamji Krishnavarma (Pathfinders)*. New Delhi: Routledge 2014. ISBN: 978-0415445542.

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Visitors to London's Highgate Hill are often drawn, magnetically, off the main road and across Waterlow Park towards the plentiful pilgrimage sites offered by Highgate Cemetery – the burial plots of Karl Marx, George Eliot, Yusuf Dadoo and many others. But if one were to turn right instead of left at The Old Crown Pub coming up Highgate Hill (ignoring for now the call of its „Karl Marx Tea Rooms“), the leafy residential street of Cromwell Avenue would reveal another pilgrimage site in the area's radical history. For the first decade of the twentieth century, number 65 Cromwell Avenue was known as „India House“, and provided a residence for young Indians studying in the imperial metropolis. It soon became notorious to intelligence officers as a „sink of sedition“, a hub for all manner of activists and intellectuals openly questioning British rule in the prize colony of India. The House was shut down in 1909 after one of its residents, the Amritsar-born engineering student Madan Lal Dhingra, assassinated colonial official Sir William Curzon Wyllie at a reception in Kensington.

Three-quarters of a century later, in 1985, the Greater London Council authorised the placing of a blue plaque – the customary public history marker for noting famous residents in the city – on 65 Cromwell Avenue. The plaque announces to visitors that „Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, 1883–1966, Indian Patriot and Philosopher, lived here“.¹ It is true that Savarkar, now recognised as a major figure in modern Indian history, lived at the site from 1906–09 whilst studying law at Gray's Inn. But the fact that he and only he is marked on the blue plaque reveals more about those who campaigned for the plaque than the crowded history of the House itself, which hosted figures as diverse as Lajpat Rai, Har Dayal, Asaf Ali and MK Gandhi himself. Savarkar is renowned as the father of „Hindutva“, the right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology that

spent decades in the shadows of Indian politics but which today dominates the main stage of the world's largest democracy.

India House was owned, operated and overseen by the accomplished scholar and public figure Shyamji Krishnavarma (1857–1930), originally from Mandvi in present-day Gujarat but who lived in England as a student in the 1880s and then again as a dissident exile from 1897. His influence on and funding for the house is not noted by the plaque (he resided nearby at 60 Muswell Hill Road), and indeed it is only in the last ten to fifteen years that his role as a „freedom fighter“ has come to be commemorated in India. In a new critical biography, Harald Fischer-Tiné asks why it is that Krishnavarma disrupts conventional histories of Indian anti-colonialism, arguing that the man's career requires us to rethink some of our basic presumptions about how to tell this history and map the geography on which it unfolded.

Fischer-Tiné's approaches Krishnavarma's „individual life history as a window onto a number of important aspects of Indian modernity“ (p. 83). He focuses on three topical foci: „knowledge“, „cosmopolitanism“ and „political violence“. These themes are explored through three different stages of Krishnavarma's biography: his early career as an intellectual intermediary between European and Indian traditions of thought, his experiences navigating dissident diasporic networks, and finally his efforts to theorise an „ethics of dynamite“ in service of the emancipation of India. Each of these studies, organised across three chronological chapters, stands alone for distinct interventions into discrete historiographical and conceptual debates. But together they cohere around one overriding methodological concern: a caution against the fetish for „mobility“ Fischer-Tiné sees as characterising much new work in global or transnational history – an enthusiasm for „entanglements, flows and connections“ which in the study of anti-colonial thought has come to accord a „quasi-magical transformative power“ to cosmopolitan „in-

¹ English Heritage - SAVARKAR, Vinayak Damodar (1883–1966), <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/blue-plaques/savarkar-vinayak-damodar-1883-1966/> (18.01.2018).

terstitial" spaces in London, Paris, Berlin and so on (p. 185). Fischer-Tiné is diplomatic in his critique, offering no explicit examples of the scholarship he has in mind, but his call for rigorous contextualisation that addresses not simply the fact of a thinker's mobility but rather the „substantive quality“ (p. 93) of their interactions is welcome indeed.

Fischer-Tiné's intervention is informed by his observation that, although Krishnavarma spent decades abroad in the company of some of the age's most radical thinkers – socialists, anarchists, suffragettes and early feminist thinkers – his own thought remained relatively „untouched“ by these interactions. Krishnavarma's eclectic alliances, for Fischer-Tiné, appear at times superficial or overdetermined by strategic considerations (pp. 72–3), and the libertarian attitudes of his bohemian company would not disturb his „quasi-brahmanical habits“ (p. 86). Evidence for this is clear in practice (Krishnavarma's resilient social conservatism) but also in his mode of political argument, which for Fischer-Tiné was consolidated by the late 1890s and determined by his status as a „devoted acolyte“ (p. 88) to the radical liberal thinker Herbert Spencer – who, incidentally, has resided since 1903 in Highgate Cemetery.

Krishnavarma's fidelity to Spencer and his brand of anti-statist critique – which attacked imperialism as both economically unsound and culturally retrogressive (p. 127) – encourages Fischer-Tiné to position his subject as a „liberal revolutionary“, who sought a „rational and universally valid ideological basis“ (p. 148) for militant resistance to oppression. Fischer-Tiné deploys Krishnavarma's endorsement of a Spencerian „voluntary outlawry“ (p. 152) to service a broader historians' offensive against outdated narratives of anti-colonial thought in India; indeed, this dismantling project is characteristic of the Pathfinders series, edited by Dilip Menon, of which this text forms part. For Fischer-Tiné, Krishnavarma's defence of violence constitutes a „third powerful language“ (p. 164) besides culturalism and socialist-internationalism, a radical perspective that can no longer be ignored.

Fischer-Tiné reminds us that Shyamji was not typical „moving revolutionary“ (p. 185),

and the elite nature of his global career is worth underlining. Krishnavarma's experience in European capitals was that of privileged salon sociality, not of underground assemblies or working mens' clubs, which explains perhaps his ability to spurn the openness required of other itinerant radicals in this era. Krishnavarma was a political dissident but also a „self-made multi-millionaire“, well known on the stock exchanges of Paris and Geneva, owning shares in countless companies from Moroccan railways to Berlin power plants (p. 57). Krishnavarma the capitalist is not, alas, a role explored in depth by Fischer-Tiné, though surely this too would provide insights into another constitutive aspect of Indian modernity.

Fischer-Tiné's research is expansive, and his facility in European and South Asian languages a great asset for mapping Krishnavarma's transcontinental wanderings. The difficulties in taming the complexities of a long life into a short biography become apparent at points. One decision Fischer-Tiné has made to manage his archive and introduce readers to an unfamiliar history is to split the narrative historical component of a chapter off from conceptual analysis or argument. But this has the effect, at times, of attributing Krishnavarma with a „dual personality“, wherein for the first part of a chapter we read about Shyamji the pragmatist, who navigates the vagaries of life and looks after his interests, only to have him displaced in the second half by Shyamji the intellectual, animated by the force and power of ideas. This is marked in Chapter Three, where we follow a disgraced narcissist and marginalised exile in Paris and Geneva before meeting a pathbreaking political thinker whose „rediscovery“ is „long overdue“ (p. 162). Is Krishnavarma propelled by individual humiliation, personal attacks or higher political ideals? Is he an opportunist, a facilitator, or an ideological innovator? These tensions remain unresolved and perhaps cannot be. But some reflection from Fischer-Tiné on the problems of biography as genre – akin to the nuance with which he meditates on global history – would have been interesting, especially around that fecund question of how we might think the contingencies of life experience alongside the pol-

ished assertions of intellectual production.

This is a minor tension in a book that offers much to lay readers of Indian history, specialist students of South Asian revolutionary politics, as well as those interested in the writing of transnational histories more generally. Fischer-Tiné ends the biography with a nod to other aspects of Krishnavarma's life and legacy which „still await serious scholarly treatment“ (p. 190), and certainly the question of „afterlives“ is prominent among these. For if Krishnavarma is not commemorated on Cromwell Avenue, one of the most tantalising aspects of the book's conclusion is the revelation that in 2010 a replica of the Highgate house was constructed halfway across the world in Mandvi, the place of Krishnavarma's birth in Gujarat, as part of a 52-acre memorial site devoted to the recently-resuscitated „freedom fighter“.² Fischer-Tiné speculates on what this twenty-first century interest in Shyamji signifies: the right-wing project to claim anti-colonial figures outside Congress-dominated historical narratives, or indeed the regional appeal of a militant nationalist-cum-global capitalist in Narendra Modi's „vibrant Gujarat“. Figures like Hemant Padhya (p. xxviii) – the UK-based Krishnavarma enthusiast who campaigned for the return of his hero's ashes from Geneva to Mandvi – offer compelling insight into the public lives of anti-colonial histories and their unconventional archives. Fischer-Tiné sets an invaluable foundation for continued conversations, securing Krishnavarma as a vital case study for thinking about Indian political modernity and anti-colonial thought in a global context.

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²Shree Shyamji Krishna Varma Memorial - About Kranti Teerth, <http://www.krantiteerth.org/about-the-memorial.html> / (18.01.2018).