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Vicki Mackenzie

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A fascinating biography of Freda Bedi, an English woman who broke all the rules of gender, race, and religious background to become both a revolutionary in the fight for Indian independence and then a Buddhist icon.

She was the first Western woman to become a Tibetan Buddhist nun--but that pioneering ordination was really just one in a life full of revolutionary acts. Freda Bedi (1911-1977) broke the rules of gender, race, and religion--in many cases before it was thought that the rules were ready to be challenged. She was at various times a force in the struggle for Indian independence, spiritual seeker, scholar, professor, journalist, author, social worker, wife, and mother of four children. She counted among her friends, colleagues, and teachers Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and many others. She was a woman of spiritual focus and compassion who was also not without contradictions. Vicki Mackenzie gives a nuanced view of Bedi and of the forces that shaped and motivated this complex and compelling figure.

The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi: British Feminist, Indian Nationalist, Buddhist Nun Details

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From Reader Review The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi: British Feminist, Indian Nationalist, Buddhist Nun for online ebook

Jen says

Well written, fascinating and a completely satisfying read. Freda Bedi's life is incredible and Vicki Mackenzie does a fantastic job of including historical context. So not only did I learn about an exceptional person I also learned more about the politics and events leading up to Indian Independence.

Ruby says

I have no idea how I hadn't heard of Freda Bedi before - she taught along side Ghandi for Indian freedom from the British empire, lifelong friends with Indira, the first western woman to become a full nun and was 2nd mother to chogyam trungpa, whom she eventually encouraged to go to England and beyond to being Buddhism to the west. The author said it best when she found no one had really written about her before, ' Her fate is that of most powerful women in history, she was simply overlooked.'

Miriam Holsinger says

What would it look like if you crossed Mother Theresa and Che Guevara with an actual mother? This book about the life of Freda Bedi was amazing and inspiring - written in a brief and straight forward easy to read manner, Bedi's life needs no embellishment. I was so inspired to learn about the ground breaking work she did for India, for women in general, and for the Tibetan diaspora. Thank you so much to Vicki Mackenzie for writing this and to all those who encouraged and supported her. More books like this please!

Em says

Review to transfer to Goodreads

The title of the book "The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi" is 100% accurate. It's hard to imagine a more revolutionary life for a woman of her time. Born in 1911 in a small town in Derbyshire England not far from the Peaks she was the second child of a watchmaker who went to war in World War I and died shortly before the war ended. After her husband died, her mother swore off God completely. But Freda was a spiritual seeker in all ways. She found she had a strong need to meditate but without instruction, her way was to go to the chapel long before service and sit alone in a pew in the silence she needed and desired. It was her Meditation from a very early age. She was raised in the Church of England, the foundational church for Episcopalianism, and she took holy communion at her confirmation, but felt that was not to be her path.

She was also very intelligent and had a facility for languages she studied French on her own and when a friend of hers wanted to study for an entrance exam to Oxford, Freda agreed to help her study, but Freda was the one who was accepted to Oxford on taking the test. She was accepted to study French literature but soon was bored with it.

But she began to attend lectures on philosophy and social justice. She became a socialist and arriving early for a lecture she met a man from India and greeted him warmly, because she knew as a dark man he was snubbed and abused by the Oxford intelligentsia. But he was cool towards her, barely acknowledging her greeting.

Later when they met at another lecture, he apologized for his rude behavior and asked if he could buy her a cup of tea. It was then they discovered how similar their views were of socialism and human rights. He was known by his initials BLP Bedi and his only aim after finishing his studies was to return to India to fight for independence from Britain. Freda agreed saying she loved her country but hated Imperialistic rule.

As they fell in love they planned to take on the battle for independence together. They married at Oxford and their biracial romance was news in the UK. He warned her before marrying that she might spend much of her married life visiting him in jail when the Indian revolution began. They tried living in Europe first, where she had their first child, but neither were happy there so as soon as they could they sailed for India. B. Bedi was not Hindi but Sikh so they initially settled in the Punjab region of his ancestors in the north.

They both eschewed material possessions and comforts to give all they could to the struggle for freedom. B. Bedi's mother looked after their son. They lived on almost nothing in a communal series of mud huts with livestock & chicken to supply sustenance. He took up freelance journalism, she took up a teaching job and became the main source of family income which continued throughout their family life, even after their second son was born.

They did all they could to speak out in support of the goals espoused by Mahatma Gandhi for Indian independence. Freda being white & British was particularly effective speaking to villagers up and down the sub-continent, listening to their concerns, and explaining how things would change for the better with independence.

On returning to the familiar mud huts after one such speaking trip she found her baby had died of dysentery in her absence. She was heartbroken and felt guilty for not being there when she was most needed. But she doubled her efforts in the struggle for independence and in future took her first son with her on her speaking trips.

The Raj was wielding power by threatening arrest and actual arrest of a list of agitators including Gandhi, Nehru and Bedi. Bedi's prophecy of Freda visiting him behind bars came true. And during one of her visits she discussed with him her plan to become a handpicked secret disciple of Gandhi, a satyagraha protester, devoted to non-violence and non-resistance even as they agitated for freedom.

Knowing arrest was in her future Freda gave her son to her husband's mother and arranged for BLP's brother to financially support the family while she and BLP were jailed.

With more and more people wanting to hear her speak and the police monitoring her activities she had to devise elaborate methods of evasion. In one case when thousands of people gathered in a field to hear her speak where an enclosed platform was built as a podium. She had already informed the local police that not only she would speak there, but also of the seditious things she intended to say.

The police surrounded her home in the mud huts and the perimeter of the field thinking, if they couldn't nab her leaving home, they'd stop her before she reached the makeshift podium.

When time went on, the police were astounded when she suddenly appeared on the stage, she had been

hiding under it for hours. She began by telling the people that any violence or resistance to her arrest would defeat their cause and make her mission a failure. As she spoke out against the Raj an English police inspector came to arrest her.

The sentence given her was 6 months in prison. A much harsher punishment than was typical, likely because she was British born and condemned British rule of India. When the news of her arrest reached newspapers around the globe her sentence was first shortened, then overturned. Because she informed authorities of her intentions it was ruled not to technically be sedition.

If after India's independence was achieved this were her last contribution to history it was revolutionary enough, but she had more to give.

Independence set off a chain of events that disrupted the fabric of life in Northern India when the Muslim state of Pakistan was formed out of the Punjab and the Bedi's and other Sikhs lost their ancestral homelands and moved to Kashmir. Freda worked tirelessly to clean up the rubble and blood of the sectarian fighting of muslim and hindi factions. And while the fighting continued and though she advocated non-violence, she joined the Women's Self-Defense Corp and carried a rifle, which she never had to use.

Eventually the various factions found a way to live side by side. Freda had two more children. She went back to teaching though she hated it. She began to read every religious text she could, the Bible, the Koran and the Torah cover to cover and still she kept seeking a deeper truth.

When Nehru became the first prime minister of India he sought her out to head up the Social Welfare Board and with a government job came government housing in Delhi where the entire family moved into a cramped, but free apartment. She threw herself headlong into the travel and mentoring of volunteer social workers. And spent hours translating the English manuals into Hindi.

Nehru also sent her as his representative to a UNESCO conference in Burma. There Freda had her first exposure to Buddhism. She had been living in the land of the Buddha's birth and enlightenment but had not heard of Buddhism until she traveled to the Buddhist nation of Burma.

Even through her hectic life as a mother, a political speaker and agitator and breadwinner, she had maintained her respite of silence for quieting her mind with no formal training. But as she entered Burma she learned the country was home to the most dedicated meditation masters on earth. She decided to avail herself of their formal training. She found a Vipassana, or Insight Meditation master who agreed to instruct her for 8 weeks. When she wasn't attending the conference she sat in meditation.

But her flash of insight happened not on the cushion, but while she had an experience of enlightenment waking through the streets of a Burmese town. It was an experience of bliss that lasted for several hours.

Afterward she collapsed and had to be flown back to India where an ambulance met her plane and transported her to her bed where she didn't speak or appear to recognize anyone and seemed almost catatonic. Putting food in front of her she ate but stared blankly at a wall, no expression on her face. She remained this way for six weeks and then gradually she seemed to come out of a trance and her face had more expression and she began to quietly respond to her children. It took a full three months to more fully recover herself.

But she had changed. After 42 years she'd finally found her spiritual path. She told her husband she would be a Buddhist until she died, and that she had made a personal vow of a

bramacharya and would abide in celibacy till the end of her life and that she wished to become a Buddhist nun. He took the news well as he too had started to pursue a spiritual quest of a Sufi healer and took the name Baba Bedi. They stayed together as a family for a long time after spiritually going in different directions.

But in 1959 that would change as the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet under chase from the Chinese military to India asking for sanctuary. Then hundreds perhaps thousands of Tibetan monastics fled Tibet to cross into India. Nehru again called on her for assistance with the waves of Tibetan refugees streaming into northern India. And it was at this crossroads in the history of Tibetan Buddhism where Freda Bedi's prescient and revolutionary vision propelled Buddhism to turn westward.

The rest of her life was lived in service to the teachings of the Buddha and in mothering young tulku monks in need of education of the modern world beyond Tibet and the east. She built schools for the young monks. Became the first western woman to be ordained not simply as a Buddhist nun, but at the level of a bikshuni nun on a level par with a monk. She took the name Sister Palmo. But informally, but with great reverence she was referred to as 'mummy-la' by the monks, nuns and laypeople she met.

More remarkable still, the Dalai Lama and the 16th Karmapa valued her counsel. She mentored Chogyam Trungpa. She built a Hermitage for Buddhist nuns which still exists 40+ years after her death. There were those who believed she was a reincarnation of Tara, the female Buddha of Compassion.

And yet with all her compassion and generosity towards those in need, her intense work to end imperialism, and her aesthetic life, she was a walking contradiction. She was mummy to thousands of refugees, but not always to her own children. When she was working to accomplish one of her grand projects she was a bit of an imperialistic tyrant, issuing orders and expecting them to be obeyed.

Even so, her legacy of helping to bring Buddhism to the west, her insistence that Buddhist nuns no longer be subservient to monks, her empowerment of Hindi women, and her connections to the unfolding history of the 'infancy' of India's independence, to Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, the Dalai Lama, Indira Gandhi, all make the story of her life a spellbinding tale.

Anna says

Brilliant story

Amazing story of life, pure inspiration! The only thing I missed in the end, is the opportunity to meet Freda in person, she is truly phenomenal woman

Farida El-gueretly says

enjoyed reading this book a - gets you thinking about how a person can be so devoted to ideologies that are continents apart, embodying every one of them, while simultaneously taking on motherhood, marriage and a career. this is someone who was driven completely by her principles and refused to compromise. the author

may have revered her a little too much throughout the book, but it was still enjoyable.

Mishti says

oh, what a wonderful journey this book was! Freda Bedi is such an inspirational figure and I, a fourteen year old, have started to look up to her beliefs and ideas. Totally worth reading!

Andréa says

Note: I accessed a digital review copy of this book through Edelweiss.

Manaal says

A well articulated story of an extraordinary woman.

Pvfrederick says

a remarkable book, thank you Vicki Mackenzie.

Anica says

Given by friend's mom.

Victoria says

What an incredible being! I feel like her darshan came through the book. Om Taray tu Taray tu ray, sowha!

Sandie says

I didn't seek out this book, had never heard of Freda Bedi, just saw it at the library and checked it out. What a powerhouse of a woman! India was Freda's passion and she devoted her life to its people, becoming the first Western woman to be ordained a Buddhist nun. She was a visionary and an activist and played a big role in raising awareness of eastern religion in the west during the 1960s and 70s. At her death in 1979 she indicated her reincarnation in the form of Jamyang Dolma Lama, a teen from Tibet who has also become a Buddhist nun. The interviews with her family and friends were verbatim which made the writing seem choppy, but the story itself endures. Freda, or Sister Palmo, was born in England in 1911, studied at Oxford, fell in love with

a student from India and moved to India where she lived until her death in 1979. I'm so glad to have learned about this mighty woman.

Bonnie says

This book starts out slow but soon is racing at an exciting pace. The subject, Freda Bedi, was an English woman who married an Indian Sikh whom she met at university. They had a strong agreement to work for the betterment of mankind in India, which at times included civil disobedience and the ensuing prison sentences. They worked with Mahatma Gandhi, and later with Nehru and Indira Gandhi at various social programs. During the Tibetan diaspora in 1959 Freda Bedi was instrumental in setting up schools and other services for the refugees. The tale is full of names and places we've heard of and very descriptive of the locales. As the title state, Ms Bedi became a Buddhist nun, another manifestation of her desire to help others. It's a fascinating book.

Elizabeth Amber Love says

My extremely in depth review is at my site: <http://www.amberunmasked.com/freda-be...>

TL;DR version:

Mackenzie included first hand quotations from Bedi's personal correspondence to her friends and family. She directly interviewed all the Bedi children and some of Freda's closest friends. There is no doubt that the way people describe Bedi's life is accurate and honorable. They were honest, even describing the personality flaws of this iconic woman. Mackenzie's biography is a great piece of work, presented neatly with first and secondhand accounts to explore Freda's amazing life.
