

Sister Nivedita : Lady with the Lamp in History of the Swadeshi Movement (1905) of India

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ABSTRACT

Sister Nivedita, born as Margaret Elizabeth Noble, was undoubtedly renowned as manaskanya/ spiritual daughter of Swami Vivekananda in modern Indian History. Margaret, an Irish teacher, social activist and educationist/ school founder witnessed a revolutionary change in her life after meeting with Vivekananda, greatest disciple of Ramakrishnadev. She established Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls" School and took an active interest in promoting Indian historical research, cultural activities and science for nation- building. During plague epidemic in Calcutta she tried her level best to nurse the poor patients and worked relentlessly for improvement of lives of Indian women of all castes. She was a staunch supporter of the noble cause of independence of India and maintained a direct relationship with leaders like Aurobindo and many of the young revolutionaries of Bengal, including those of Anushilan Samiti, a secret organization. Nivedita wrote a large number of famous books such as Kali The Mother , The Web of Indian Life and The Master as I saw Him etc. Her book Kali The Mother influenced Abanindranath Tagore who painted Bharat Mata , a milestone in history of the Bengal School. In short she was closely associated with all arenas which were relevant for all-round development of our colonised motherland and became an eminent pillar of the Swadeshi phase of Bengal. In this study I tried a lot to depict contribution of Nivedita Lokmata in history of Indian nationalism.

1. Introduction

I went through a large number of important and well-researched books for proper documentation on Sister Nivedita such as *Nivedita Lokmata* (Volume II, III and IV) written by Shankariprashad Basu, *Bharater Muktsangrame Charampanthi Parva* and *Italir Renaissance Bangalir Sanskriti* written by Amallesh Tripathi, *Vivekananda O Samakalin Bharatbarsha* (Volume VI) of Shankariprashad Basu, *Bharater Swadhinata Andolone "Yugantar" Patrikar Dan Ba Sri Aurobindo O Banglay Biplabhad* written by Haridas and Uma Mukhopadhyay, *Binay Sarkarer Baithake* (Volume I) of Haridas Mukhopadhyay, *Goenda Reporte "Rajnaitik Sadhu" O Ramakrishna Mission* of Ladlimohan Raychaudhuri and *The Frail Hero and Virile History, gender and the politics of culture in colonial Bengal* of Indira Chowdhury etc. Many articles published in famous periodicals namely *Sahitya Parishat-Patrika*, *Basudhara*, *Parichay*, *Shiladitya*, *Srijan*, *Parikatha*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Social Scientist*, *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, *India Past and Present* had been also studied thoroughly for obtaining complete picture of that particular phase through which Nivedita lived her life working relentlessly.

While analysing life and works of Nivedita one can see that there were three distinct phases of her life : first one was from her birth upto her meeting with Swami Vivekananda in 1895, second stage was about her transformation by Swamiji from Margaret Noble to Nivedita and extended upto demise of her guru Vivekananda and third phase was undoubtedly prominent through aura of her endless self- sacrifice for sake of our motherland India. The third one clearly manifested

enormous changes that took place in her psychological world following path- breaking teaching and guidance of Vivekananda.

2. Early life and transformation from Margaret to Nivedita

Margaret Elizabeth Noble, born on 28th October 1867 in the town of Dungannon of Ireland , was daughter of Samuel Richmond Noble and Mary Isabel. Her father taught her importance of the ideal of service to mankind and she comprehended that this was nothing but the symbol of true service to God. She inherited the undaunted spirit of freedom and deep- rooted love for her country through her grandfather Hamilton. Educated at Halifax College, Margaret became a dedicated educationist and voluntarily accepted the life of hardship and sacrifice through joining as a teacher in an orphanage of Rugby (1886). After that she took up a post at the coal- mining area Wrexham in North Wales and devoted herself in social welfare in slum areas without any inhibition. She resumed her studies in the field of Education and came to know the ideology of the Swiss education reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Frobel of Germany. In 1892 she started her own independent school at Kingsleygate and obtained knowledge about art from Ebenezer Cooke. Thus background of full- fledged development of personality of Margaret Noble was prepared and one can find reflection of her characteristics in her life later when she became renowned as Nivedita.

She got the coveted opportunity of attending several lectures of Swami Vivekananda when he visited London and was deeply influenced by his Vedantic philosophy and the

ideology that truth was an integral part of all religions. In 1898, Margaret responded to the call of Swamiji and reached India leaving behind her friends and family. He thoroughly and skilfully explained Indian history, philosophy, literature, social traditions and also the glorious lives of eminent personalities (both ancient and modern) before her and encouraged her to visit Hindu ladies to observe / understand their lifestyle and religiosity. She gradually became one of the closest associates of *Ramakrishna-sahadharmini* Sarada Devi, who according to Margaret was one of the greatest and strongest of women. Swamiji formally initiated Margaret in the vow of Brahmacharyya on 25th March, 1898 and gave her the name *Nivedita* (*Dedicated*). Later she did full justice to her name by sacrificing her life for India, motherland of her *guru* through becoming *sebika-bandhabini-mata* of our colonised countrymen. Her love for India was manifested in her famous books namely *Kali the Mother*, *The Web of Indian Life*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, *The Master as I saw Him*, *Studies from an Eastern Home*, *Myths of the Hindus & Buddhists*, *Footfalls of Indian History* etc. Nivedita tried her level best for upliftment of Indian women and also for well-being of poor patients during the outbreak of plague epidemic in Calcutta in 1899. Eminent people such as Rabindranath Tagore, Jagadishchandra Bose, Sri Aurobindo and Abanindranath Tagore became inspired by charismatic spirit of Sister Nivedita.

3. Contribution in militant/ revolutionary nationalism

Renowned Nivedita- researcher Shankariprashad Basu in his book entitled *Nivedita Lokmata* (Volume II) highlighted analysis of DR. Bimanbehari Mazumdar and Girijashankar Raychaudhuri for describing active role of *manaskanya* of Swamiji in revolutionary politics. According to the opinion of this eminent academician the time span from August 1902 upto July 1905 ought to be termed as *Nivedita Yug*. But Haridas Mukherjee and Uma mukherjee discarded the theory of active participation of Sister Nivedita in militant / revolutionary politics and especially direct involvement with the Yugantar group through their famous book entitled *Swadeshi Andolan O Banglar Nabayug*.

Her *guru* Vivekananda was deeply traumatised by the misery of the colonised people of India and according to his viewpoint, education was the ultimate panacea for all evils of contemporary indigenous society under the barbaric British rule. Margaret had been selected by him for the role of educating Indian women. Initially she was quite optimistic about occidental rule in our motherland but later she concluded that it was indispensable for India to gain freedom to achieve prosperity.

When Nivedita began maintaining a direct relationship with many of the young revolutionaries of Bengal, including those of Anushilan Samity, a secret organization, she publicly disassociated herself from the newly formed Ramakrishna Mission. Actually she was aware of the fact that the Mission would face wrath of the colonial government on account of her seditious political activities. Vivekananda and the politics of ascetic masculinity / the dynamism of the sannyasi icon left a deep-rooted imprint on psychological world on revolutionary freedom-fighters. According to Indira Chowdhury, the author of the famous book entitled *The Frail Hero and Virile History*, this icon of spiritual heroism held a special appeal for the

participants in the Swadeshi movement in 1905. But Swamiji did not support Nivedita when she wanted to join politics of extremist nationalism directly because he thought that India needed proper education before preparation of groundwork of such politics. But after his death active involvement of Nivedita touched its zenith and that truth was well-documented in the book entitled *Agniyug* (Volume I) written by renowned revolutionary leader Barindrakumar Ghosh who opined that- *Bhagini Nivedita charampanthi netarupe Sri Aurobinder agragami*. She donated many books of her library for revolutionary youth force of contemporary Bengal such as *History of the Irish Revolution*, biographies of Mazzini and Garibaldi, *History of the Sepoy Mutiny*, *History of the American War of Independence*, biography of Oliver Cromwell etc. According to Shankariprashad Basu, Nivedita delivered inspiring lectures on national education and revolutionary tactics in the Dawn Society of Satischandra Mukhopadhyay. She designed the national flag of India with the thunderbolt as the emblem against a red background. She provided financial support and leveraged her contacts to get information/ data from government agencies and also forewarn the revolutionaries. She tried her level best to expose Lord Curzon after his lecture in 1905 at the University of Calcutta where he declared with pride that eternal truth was given a higher place in the moral codes of the West, than in East. After going through extensive research Nivedita became capable to announce that the book *Problems of The Far East* written by Curzon could be an important example of his tendency towards falsification. Curzon himself had given false statements about his age and marriage to the President of the Korean Foreign Office to win his favour. This statement when published in famous newspapers such as *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *The Statesman* left Curzon deeply embarrassed. Nivedita also opined that Curzon tried to destroy growth of nationalist scientific research in India. She relentlessly propagated philosophy of nationalism of India and her ideology was skilfully depicted in her path-breaking book entitled *The Web of Indian Life*. *The Pioneer*, well-known for its staunch imperialist colour, in their review of that book pointed out that it was nothing but a political pamphlet in disguise. Actually Nivedita compared patriotic spirit of Joan of Arc with that of Queen of Jhansi, the legendary figure in the history of the rebellion of 1857 and also Chandbibi. This comparison aroused immense anger of the imperialist ruling class. Nivedita also announced Vivekananda Gold Medal prize for those who could write illustrious essays on various themes relevant for Indian nationalism. She earnestly gave effort to discard the claims made by missionaries that social reform movements in India was nothing but thoroughly outcome of their propaganda only. She elaborately discussed glorious role of indigenous leaders like Rammohan and Vidyasagar and also gave thrust on contribution of Guru Nanak and Chaitanyadev for their strong opposition against the brutal custom of sati and caste-based social stratification. She was an ardent supporter of development of historical research in India and wholeheartedly supported Jadunath Sarkar and also Radhakumud Mukhopadhyay. She revised the manuscript of the book entitled *Indian Shipping* written by Radhakumud Mukhopadhyay and helped Dineshchandra Sen when he was busy in editing the book namely *History of Bengali Literature*.

Nivedita was continuously kept under surveillance of the British police force and espionage network had been always active to discover actual matter of her letters. Cornelia Sorabji was involved in this secret network of colonial administration. When *Yugantar* case started, she left India for completely political reason to avoid imprisonment. She tried earnestly to protest against curbing freedom of speech/propaganda of nationalist newspapers/periodicals during the Swadeshi Movement. Her extremist activities left the British government quite annoyed and they tried to involve Nivedita in cases of political dacoity. She protested against brutal torture and policy of high-handedness of the colonial police force on extremist leaders and especially on Krishnakumar Mitra and Ashwinikumar Dutta. She was a staunch supporter of the theory of Drain of Wealth from India and gave endeavour to unmask exploitative character of the British rule in her essays. She instructed Aurobindo, a renowned pillar of the revolutionary movement of Bengal, to leave Calcutta and take shelter in Chandannagore to avoid the clutches of confinement. In his absence Nivedita edited *Karma Yogin*, the famous nationalist newspaper of Aurobindo. She was undoubtedly a lady with the lamp for Subrahmanya Bharati, a famous Tamil poet full of patriotic flavour of the Swadeshi era and editor of *Balbharat Patrika* of Trimulacharyya of Madras.

Her path-breaking book entitled *Kali The Mother* influenced revolutionary leaders like Aurobindo and eminent historians such as Bimanbehari Mazumdar, Amalesh Tripathi, Nemaisadhan Basu discussed its deep impact on *Bhabani Mandir* of Aurobindo himself. She helped Okakura to write book namely *Ideals of the East* which became quite popular during the Swadeshi phase by establishing distinct cultural identity of the oriental world and thwarting onslaught of hegemonic occidental civilization. She became capable to inspire legendary leader Bagha Jatin/ Jatindranath Mukhopadhyay who sacrificed his life for his colonised motherland. Charles Tegart depicted influence of extremist nationalist spirit of Nivedita on youth force of contemporary Bengal in his report on the Ramakrishna Mission.

4. Contribution in history of Indian journalism

Revolutionary activities in Madras flourished due to the ideological influence of Vivekananda and Nivedita. *Balbharat Patrika*, published by well-known extremist Trimulacharyya and edited by Subrahmanya Bharati, was quite famous for its militant nationalist flavour. Subrahmanya Bharati was thoroughly influenced by Sister Nivedita and wrote a large number of patriotic poems during the Swadeshi Movement. *Balbharat*, at first weekly and then monthly periodical, had to bear with the aggressive wrath of the colonial government and its policy-maker Nivedita was always under monitoring of the British Intelligence Branch.

When Aurobindo took shelter in Chandannagore, Nivedita, following his request, edited *Karma Yogin Patrika* and many articles related to various themes of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement and Indian art were published in it.

Mr. S.K. Ratcliffe, acting editor of esteemed newspaper *The Statesman*, was influenced by charismatic and towering personality of Nivedita. He wrote about the Swadeshi Movement in such a way so that the character of the

movement used to look positive in international arena. Naturally the colonial government was severely annoyed and *The Statesman* had to face frontal confrontation from their side. Ratcliffe obtained help from F. C. Mackarness, who was very much vocal against atrocities of the colonial police force during the Swadeshi phase.

Nivedita wrote an important article in famous periodical *Modern review* describing briefly about those Englishmen who were sympathetic towards the nationalist movement of India. Its title was- *Our Friends in Parliament and Outside*. She fiercely attacked brutal repression inflicted on eminent extremist leader Lala Lajpat Rai by the colonial government. She continuously targeted Lord Curzon for his aggressive imperialist nature and onslaught on development of education and scientific research in India. Ramananda Chattopadhyay, editor of *Modern Review*, did not hesitate to declare that he was indebted to Sister Nivedita for enrichment of his esteemed periodical.

5. Contribution in development of nationalist art

Eminent historian Jadunath Sarkar declared that Nivedita was an ardent supporter of Indian art and she tried her level best to establish glory of art of *Bharatiya chitrakala-shilpigosthi* in the circle of intellectual people of colonial Bengal. She was deeply influenced by ideology of art of her guru Swami Vivekananda who upheld the aesthetic beauty of religiosity-centric and symbol-based Hindu art and also Mughal art of Medieval India. He discarded painting of well-known artist Rabivarma for blind imitation of occidental art.

Nivedita gave sincere effort to promote art related education in her school for women and published a pamphlet entitled *Project of The Ramakrishna School for Girls* in which she propagated importance of handicrafts of our motherland. In her essay about women and art she elaborately depicted that rejuvenation process of ancient indigenous handicrafts and role of our women would be closely interlinked. Nivedita described necessity of national art-symbol in her essay related to art and womenfolk mentioned above. Okakura requested Nivedita to write introduction of his art-centric path-breaking book entitled *Ideals of The East* because he was completely aware of her knowledge about the world of art.

Nivedita was a staunch supporter of the Bengal School which had been flourished by Havell-disciple Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Basu. Actually Havell got respect of Nivedita because he discarded tendency of exaggeration quite popular in occidental circle while analysing impact of the Greek Art on Indian Art. She praised book of Havell entitled *Indian Sculpture and Painting* wholeheartedly because it was full of admiration for Indian culture. She wrote three articles about this famous book in pages of *Modern Review* namely *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, *Havell on Hindu Sculpture and Havell on Indian Painting*. While discussing extensively on book of Havell, Nivedita announced that not Rabivarma but Abanindranath Tagore could be the last word in arena of Indian Art and he expressed the beautiful style of the Mughal art through his renowned paintings.

Nivedita was not at all reactionary/ blind revivalist and so she upheld the theory that the Indian art should take the

ideology of linkage of art with socio- historical consciousness flourished especially in France of Europe. She thoroughly used the platform of *Modern Review* for publishing her illustrious writings related to art such as *The Ancient Abbey of Ajanta*. Tapati Guha Thakurta criticised Nivedita for attempt of mixture of extremist nationalism with analysis of the art of India through esteemed periodicals such as *Modern Review* and *Prabasi*.

Nivedita elaborately discussed renowned paintings of Abanindranath Tagore such as *Bharat Mata*, *Sita*, *Shahjahaner Taj- swapna and Sajahaner Antim Shajya* etc. Her book *Kali the Mother* left great impact on psychological world of Abanindranath Tagore, painter of *Bharat Mata*.

A.K. Coomaraswamy, renowned stalwart in field of Indian art related analysis/ critique, had been influenced by two famous books of Nivedita such as *Kali the Mother* and *Web of Indian Life*. Nivedita on the other hand praised four books of Coomaraswamy through *Modern Review* and those books were- *The Aims of Indian Art*, *The Influence of Greek on Indian Art*, *Indian Drawings*, and *Selected Examples of Indian Art*.

Nivedita published a large number of essays full of knowledge about archaeology, history of art etc. through the esteemed periodical entitled *Modern Review*. Those essays were- *The Function of Art in shaping Nationality*, *The Place of Foreign Culture in a True Education*, *On the Influence of History in the Development of Modern India* etc.

Eminent artist Nandalal Basu got immense support and encouragement from Nivedita. His famous paintings namely *Sati* and *Uma* undoubtedly upheld the glory of chastity of traditionalist Indian womanhood. Amallesh Tripathi opined that he depicted *Kumarasambhav Kavya* successfully through his artistic creation. His paintings such as *Shiber bishpan*, *Shib Sati*, *Satir dehatyag*, *Umar tapasya* and also *Protyakhyata Uma* were full of aesthetic taste of the renowned artist. Abanindranath- disciple Nandalal Basu always tried his level

best to establish glory of indigenous art with militant nationalist spirit and so naturally he had been praised by Nivedita. Nivedita found his painting *Sati* quite relevant for the Swadeshi era because it upheld the spirit of selfless sacrifice. She encouraged Nandalal to visit Ajanta and Abanindranath Tagore expressed his gratitude for that constructive role of Nivedita.

Aurobindo, influenced by Sister Nivedita, criticised style of Rabivarma and expressed deep admiration for the art of Bengal School (enriched by Abanindranath Tagore) through his famous periodical entitled *Karma Yogin*. His important essays were- *The Awakening Soul of India*, *Indian Art and an Old Classic*, *Indian Art and Industry- Mr. Havell's View* etc.

Historian Girijashankar Raychaudhuri in his book *Sri Aurobindo O Banglar Swadeshi Yug* had rightly pointed out that- *Pashchatya adarsho barjan koria prachya adarshe nutan chitrangan padhdhatir janmadata Abanindranath Thakur... Bhagini Nivedita ei chitrangan padhdhatike sutikagar hoite bahir koria tahar jivaner sesh din parjanto ehar sudhirgha shaishabkale ei nabajato shishuke matrisnehe lalonpalon koria giachhen*.

6. Conclusion

Undoubtedly it must be admitted that Nivedita loved India and its people with such fathomless depth that no Indian leader/ educationist of her era also could surpass her *bharatprem*. She left imprint of her dedicated work on all fields of socio- cultural and intellectual development of contemporary Bengal/ India- education for women, social service, literary works, revolutionary upsurge, nationalist art etc. Our Swadeshi phase was greatly indebted to her because she continued supporting young revolutionaries knowing the fact completely that she could face imprisonment any time. Words inscribed in her epitaph in Darjeeling rightly declared that Nivedita was such a person who gave her all to India.

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