

Nivedita, the Mother of Indian Nationalism

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In his centennial tribute to Sister Nivedita, Anandagopal Sengupta, a Bengali poet, wrote, we are yet to repay our immense debt to her (*ekhono hoini shodh / Se bakeyā rin*). Indeed, even after another fifty years we have got to admit the same. The pervasive aggravation of greed, degradation of individuals into diminutive, hypocritical schemers, and the level of general degeneration of the national character touching the nadir—all these indicate an absolute betrayal of the dream of India that this indefatigable fighter had envisioned.

Completely dedicated, as she had been to India, this divine personality had envisioned an enlightened, reawakened India founded upon her ancient heritage, and strengthened by a modern orientation, which, working together, would offer a new light to the world. But we have not yet been able to respond to the call of that radiant light.

Nripadrakrishna Chattopadhyay wrote in his essay 'Lokmata Nivedita': 'It was to educate people, to establish his ideal that Swami Vivekananda had brought his disciple. If his purpose failed, it was due to no fault of his own, or that of Nivedita. The blame should be on us who have given up the ideal, who have relegated humanity in order to advance material benefits and personal interests,—and thereby lost even the capacity of imbibing Vivekananda's teachings and drawing inspiration from Nivedita's vision and

work.' (Trans. from Bengali)

Having arrived in India, in response to the Guru's call to join the mission of Indian Renaissance, India became Nivedita's only commitment and pursuit. Already trained by modern education and equipped with a refined mind and many-faceted talent as she had been, Miss Margaret Elizabeth Noble's life now took a new direction. After receiving her initiation from the Guru, she was, as it were, 'twice-born'. In this new birth she was also given a new name. She herself used to write: 'Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda'; but through her inspired and enthusiastic work for the country she eventually proved herself to be 'Nivedita of India'. Her mission of life, henceforth, would be to stir the dormant *ātmashakti* in every sphere of Indian life, and to launch a relentless work towards ushering in an Indian Renaissance.

The sphere of her study and work, beginning with women's education here, before long spread over a wide range of activities: from political independence movement to the study and cultivation of Indianness in sincere thought and courageous action, the promotion of Indian literature and folklore, painting and the fine arts, scientific explorations, lifestyle, etc. Eventually she emerged as the mother of Indian Renaissance in the truest sense of the term. Inspired by the Guru, she had realized that just as freedom was one's first concern—be it in spiritual life or terrestrial existence—political freedom too was

indispensable in the nation's life. And in order to attain it and make it fruitful, it was important to awaken the *ātmashakti* within one.

Two phases

The brief life of Nivedita spans mainly over two phases: prior to her coming to India, and subsequent to the arrival. During the preliminary stage of self-preparation we find her as Margaret Noble, the spirited Irish lady, engaged in an honest quest for a meaningful life, while simultaneously pursuing the mission of education and various other activities appropriate for a talented mind and personality. After reaching India, again, her life was phased out into two stages: initially it was a life of spiritual quest and quest for the spirit of India: later, after the demise of the Guru, we find her in the image of an iron lady engaged in a pioneering work in connection with the Indian independence movement and the Indian Renaissance. The thunderbolt was the symbol of the force she worshipped, whereas the warrior's courage and heroic drive were ingrained in her Celtic blood. But, in a strange combination, this valiance had embraced and assimilated the affectionate spirit of a compassionate mother. This affection was not only evident in her address of the star-scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose as 'bairn' (child), but it also spurted out endlessly towards the poorest of the poor in the big cities and remote villages. Like the typical Bengali mother, she would often give away her own modest meal to the hungry, while going herself without food. The impact of such acts on her own health was not always favourable though. So she can be truly called the 'royal mother' in her affection while a 'prince' in her valour.

During his travel through India, Swami Vivekananda had been deeply disturbed by

the poverty-indignity-ignorance and repression of his fellow countrymen, and especially by the dire strait of women in general. On the other hand, while visiting America, he came to realize how the role of emancipated active women could be a positive and valuable resource for the respective society. Side by side, the custom of child-marriage and the consequent miserable plight of the child-mother, forced to bear and rear children since the age of twelve, had shocked and pained him like anything. He came to the conviction that unless and until the women of India were educated and self-dependent, true awakening of the country should remain a far cry.

Actually, during his triumphant journey through America the contribution of some eminent American ladies was remarkable. They had sincerely helped Swamiji in various ways. Finally, came Miss Noble, who accepted him as her Guru, and dedicated herself to India.

Here too, we find Swami Vivekananda an exception among Indian monks. Whereas, for monks in India generally, even looking at the face of a woman was considered a sin or aberration, Vivekananda, enriched by his experience abroad, rejected this approach. Furthermore, this made him acutely conscious of the unbearable situation of the Indian women, and of the need of their education and awakening. Thanks to the impact of the Bengal Renaissance, the menfolk here had attained some progress in education, but the women were denied this privilege. Be it in the upper social stratum, or lower, the woman's lot was to undergo lifelong deprivation without complaint, and without hope. So Swamiji had been waiting for such a talented and dedicated woman who would devote herself to the work of educating women. In Margaret he saw the possibility of fulfilling the dream.

When Swamiji came to know that Nivedita was determined to come to India and join his work, he wrote in a letter that India needed a lioness. On another occasion he had said in no uncertain terms that since there was a dearth of such ideal women in India, we had to borrow them from outside. At the same time he had not missed to warn her about the possible culture shock, the possible clash between her education and upbringing on the one hand and, on the other, the dire poverty, the excesses of casteism, the servile mentality which prevailed here. But Margaret took all this in her stride, overcame all the obstacles at ease, and through her dauntless unceasing work day by day, finally emerged from the Nivedita of Ramakrishna- Vivekananda to Nivedita of India.

When, after a thorough self-probing, Margaret came to India in January 1898, she was just 31. Guru Vivekananda received her at the Kolkata port and escorted her to the city. Following the initiation ceremony she was given her new name—Nivedita. Her new life of austerity and hard work commenced in a shabby residence on a narrow lane of Baghbazar.

Did she resent or feel sad at not being included in the hierarchy of the ‘*sannyasin*’? Anyway, she made this poor house the sanctorum of Indian resurrection. She crossed the confines of exclusive educational work and eventually embraced the ideals of nation-building, national independence, and man-making mission.

She came in close contact with the real life in India; first through her Baghbazar school, and thereafter through her admirable relief work during the Calcutta plague. Then came the opportunity to accompany her Guru on his travel through parts of India. Bit by bit she conquered the inhibitions generated by her Western

education and imbibed culture, and ultimately became a genuine Indian to the core of her existence.

Tagore wrote in his essay, ‘Bhagini Nivedita’: ‘When she used to say, “Our people”, it rang such a note of kinship, which none else among us could do. Sister Nivedita had truly loved the countrymen; whoever has seen her has certainly felt that, we may give our people our time, money, even our life, but we do not give our heart as she had done; we did not have that strength of love’.

Vivekananda had exhorted his fellow countrymen, ‘... Proudly proclaim at the top of thy voice: “The Indian is my brother, the Indian is my life, India’s gods and goddesses are my God, India’s society is the cradle of my infancy, the pleasure-garden of my youth, the sacred heaven, the Vārānasi of my old age.”’ Nivedita had imbibed that conviction and applied it in her life day in and day out, thus emerging as the epitome of Indianness.

Guru’s patriotism

Nivedita had come in close contact with the Guru’s patriotism and love of humanity, when she accompanied him on board during his trip to London. Nivedita said later, this had been the best time of her life. It was during this long journey that Nivedita fully realized how ardent was the Guru’s patriotism, and how deeply saddened he was at its miserable plight in the present. In her book *The Master as I saw Him*, Nivedita writes: ‘Manmaking, he said, was his own task, but he was a born lover, and the queen of his adoration was his motherland...’ The patriotic mission of Swamiji, which he called his ‘manmaking religion’, along with his call to serve the country and the people in misery had inspired Nivedita very deeply. Possibly it was due to this inspiration that

the last phase of her life took a new turn. Subsequent to Swami's demise in 1902, Nivedita emerged in a new role in which, in conformity with the Swami's own assertion, there was no scope for '*bhakti-mukti*' (religious devotion, liberation of the soul). There top priority was given to national awakening, and the assertion of Indians and Indianness in various walks of life.

In order to serve that cause she had also harnessed her power of writing, in addition to her other multi-pronged activities. (One can go through her Collected Writings to get an idea). On the one hand, in the field of literature she sought to introduce Tagore's writings to the European readers via translation; on the other, in the domain of science, she mobilized all sorts of assistance to establish Jagadish Chandra Bose at home and abroad; this was in addition to rendering all possible assistance to Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose towards exploring new horizons in Indian painting and the fine arts. She also assisted Dinesh Chandra Sen to compile the history of Bengali literature. All this she did while keeping herself completely out of the limelight, always behind the screen.

Involvement with the revolutionaries

But on top of it all, the most amazing feat was her unreserved active involvement with the Bengali revolutionaries, and the assistance rendered by her to Aurobindo, Barindra, Mahendra, *et al*, in their revolutionary activities. She did not even hesitate to sever her ties with the R. K. Mission which sought to tread with caution. She went alone.

Looking deeper, one can see how Sri Ramakrishna had imparted his dynamism to Vivekananda, and his stability to Ma Saradmoni. Similarly, Vivekananda too appears to have divided himself into two

directions: Ramakrishna Mission being given the responsibility of carrying on the spiritual movement, whereas Nivedita was to carry on the mission of national resurrection and national freedom movement. In this context it may be pointed out that just as Ramakrishna had discovered Vivekananda, Vivekananda in his turn had discovered Nivedita. And just as Vivekananda had given his life away for spreading Ramakrishna's precepts, Nivedita too gave her life for broadcasting Vivekananda's vision of India.

If we relate the extremely active life of Nivedita during this phase, to the great Indian personalities of the time, we are bound to be overwhelmed by the range. She had great regard for Tagore as a writer, and had translated some of his stories, like 'Kabuliwalla', 'Dena-Paona', 'Chuti', with the intention to introduce him to the foreign readers. To mobilize support and recognition for Jagadish Chandra Bose's scientific talent she had exerted herself to a great extent, while also editing some of his treatise. Similarly she wrote articles about Abanindranath, Nandalal Bose, A. Coomaraswami in journals, and thereby giving publicity to their artistic enterprise. Her only aim was to discover and nurture Indian talents, and securing recognition of their work from the big world outside.

Perhaps what was the most significant aspect of the later years of Nivedita was her fervent interest in, and strong involvement with the Indian freedom fighters and revolutionaries. This longing for independence from foreign rule had been innate in her blood, inherited from her Irish grandfather (through mother), and her own Scottish father. As a student in England, Aurobindo had come in contact with the Irish zealots. Later, when he came to know Nivedita, together they sought to plan and

work out a revolutionary programme for India. Nivedita became directly involved in the Swadeshi Movement of Bengal. Both of them believed in the alliance of the *Gitā* and the sword, the spiritual and the physical forces.

Nivedita had run about from end to end of the country to propagate this message of national freedom. She had joined the Benaras Conference of the Indian National Congress in 1905, and had brought together leaders of opposite camps, the Extremists and the Moderates, like Bipin Pal and Gokhle together, as she believed that the Congress should be the platform for all nationalistic aspirations. She had played an active role behind the publication of revolutionary papers from Paris, Germany,

London; she also arranged shelters for the revolutionaries in Boston. When Aurobindo was ordered to leave the city after his release from jail, Nivedita agreed to edit the paper *Karmayogin* on his behalf.

However, the tremendous pressure of excessive hard work, along with an austere lifestyle, was taking its toll. Her health gave way and she passed away in Darjeeling on 13 October 1911. On the eve of imminent death she was supposed to have said that her boat was sinking; but she could see the sun rising. It seems to suggest that though her own life was sinking she could envision the rising of her India.

She gave herself away for the cause of India without keeping back the least bit. Such a gift can never die away. ■

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Radhu's crazy mother, Surabala, and a host of selfish nieces and brothers on the one hand, and pure souls like swamis Saradananda, Yogananda, Adbhutananda on the other. But Mother calmly lived a nonpareil God-centred life amidst all this. She has shown how one can perform worldly duties of the households keeping God at the centre of life.

Holy Mother has thus proved that Sri Ramakrishna, the Incarnation of the present age, has not come only for the well-being of the sannyasins, he has come for the

entire humanity. Thus she has made Sri Ramakrishna universal. She has revealed the real purpose of his advent. So, in every sense, she is the spiritual consort or collaborator—*sahadharmini*—of Sri Ramakrishna. A writer has said beautifully that if Sri Ramakrishna is the wish-fulfilling tree, Holy Mother Sarada Devi is then its extended bough. If we, the sannyasins as well as the householders, can cast our lives in her mould, then Sri Ramakrishna's ideal or *bhāva* will find its concrete expression in us. ■

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