

## SISTER NIVEDITA: A DEDICATED SOUL OF CREATIVE CULTURE

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### I

The period of glorious contributions of Sister Nivedita for the welfare of the people in India with sacrifice and love introduced a new chapter in the history of renaissance in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Coming from the Western world, a dedicated service of Margaret Elizabeth Noble in India and her absorption into the main stream of Indian life and thought proves her extraordinarily genius and intense love for her adopted country. Two powerful words 'Love India' as delivered by Vivekananda are the sources of spirit for Nivedita who transform the life of a sister to become a great *Karmayogi* to serve India in all respect. The clarion call of Swami Vivekananda and his extraordinary personality with a burning path of religious passion inspired Nivedita to contribute a lot to Indian society. A great change came in her life when she realized the works of Swami Vivekananda, "This life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word like thunder bolt.... world is in need of those whose

Awake, awake, great one! The world is burning with misery. Can you sleep? Instead of good, happy life of ease and comfort with her wealth, fame, home and family, she chooses the path of hardship in an unknown country. "Being inspired by Swami Vivekananda's transcendent renunciation and strength of character, sister Nivedita has chosen to follow his path of total sacrifice for one's own liberation and for the good of the world and to dedicate her life for the welfare of India which was stricken by poverty and distress. In the words of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, "She came to us because she felt the call of India. She came to us because she felt the fascination of India. She came to give India the worship of her heart on one side and to take her place among India's sons and daughters in the great work that lies before us." In 1899, Sister Nivedita went to London from Calcutta with Swami Vivekananda on a ship. During the six weeks journey, she had an experience of enlightenment that changed her life forever; she dived deep into her master's powerful thoughts and achieved gems of insights. The power of truth and purity and the light changed her line of thinking which was expressed in her master piece, *The Master as I Saw Him*. Sanjeeb Chattopadhaya rightly says that Margaret is not an ordinary lady. From the beginning of her childhood she was in search of Truth which she found not in the church. She met Vivekananda whom she addressed as her Master. His words became a guideline for all her life that pacified her restless spirit. She desired to make herself

the servant of his love for his own people. On 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1897, Swamiji wrote: “Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What is desired is not in a man, but in a woman, a real lioness, to work for the Indians, women specially.” Swamiji realized that her education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood made her just the woman India wanted.

In India, Nivedita was trained to mould herself in tune with Indian culture. She was taught Bengali for good communication with others in Bengal. She learned glorious history of India and observed the status, education, condition and culture of the people of India. During their journey to England, Swamiji fully expressed his ideal, “You must give up all visiting, and live in strict seclusion. You have to be a Hindu in your thoughts, needs, conceptions and habits. Your life, internal and external, has to be all that of an orthodox Hindu Brahmin and *Brahmachari*. The method will come to you, only you desire it sufficiently. But you have to forget your own past, and be the cause to be forgotten.”<sup>1</sup> Nivedita accepted the proposal with a deep sense of reverence. The problem that occupied the thought of Vivekananda was how to reconcile the old and the new, how to nationalize the modern and modernized. He had complete faith on Nivedita’s capacity for working out a solution for this problem. Vivekananda emphasized on woman’s education in India, their place and right in society. In spite of latent qualities in them they are exploited for many years due to foreign invasion and darkness of Hinduism that belonged in the society. The progress of India would never be possible if women are not educated.

## II

For Vivekananda, all the great qualities present within the Indian women need to be transmuted through education and example into a new set of values in tune with modernity. With this noble view, Nivedita gave all she had for the establishment of her school. Though her scope was limited, she knew that to ignite fire, a large amount of fire wood is not needed. One can very well ignite fire with limited firewood and by careful attention it would spread out in all directions. On 13<sup>th</sup> November, 1898, Nivedita Girls’ School was founded in Bosepara Lane, Kolkata with the presence of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda, and Swami Sharadananda along with the blessings of Sarada Devi. Nivedita had a strong

conviction that from this school the great and learned women like Gargi and Maitreyi will come out.<sup>3</sup>

It was not an easy task to continue a girls' school in an orthodox situation where Hindus were against women's education and Nivedita could hardly accept girl students for her school. Those who attended the school included small girls, young married women, house wives and widows. Languages, mathematics, hand work, sewing, drawing, and painting were taught there. The junior students were taught by their seniors. Among the senior students were three or four girls who were child widows and who have devoted their whole life to the school. <sup>4</sup> In spite of great financial stringency and hardships, Nivedita's spirit was continued to run the school. Rabindranath wrote: "She did not maintain the school on the funds received from public or from excess money. It was run completely on her sacrificing her own means of existence."<sup>5</sup>

One may wonder: how was Nivedita succeeded in pioneering the first and only national school for woman in the country through self sacrifice to starvation. She taught mathematics, art and English. Her method of teaching was so good that even weak students easily understand the subjects with earnest interest. Through her novel method of teaching arithmetic, the young girls not only improved their memory and power of thinking but also develop a deeper understanding of the science of mathematics. She encouraged the students and say 'Never keep any mistake. As soon as you know it is a mistake, scratch it out'. Swami Vivekananda wanted that there must be a harmony between the plan for reformation of India and her religion. Education must be given to the students for developing patriotic consciousness along with religious temperament. India wants a good work culture. But Swamiji said that Nivedita should not give up the old heritage of spiritual treasure of India. Nivedita expressed Swamiji's thoughts, "He could not foresee a Hindu woman of the future, entirely without the old power of meditation. Modern science, women must learn, but not at the cost of the ancient spirituality."<sup>6</sup> Swamiji says, "True woman-hood, like true-manhood, was not a matter of mere externals. And unless it was held and developed the spirit of true woman-hood, there would be no education of woman worthy of the name."<sup>7</sup> Like Vivekananda, Nivedita also had a great faith on the spirit of Indian woman. In her words, "Her (India's) sanctuary today is full of shadows. But

when the woman hood of India can perform the great Arati of Nationality, that temple shall be all light, may the dawn verily is near at hand.”<sup>8</sup> Nivedita introduced the model of education among girls that would help them in national awakening.

Nivedita’s interest was to teach the students Indian art like thousand petalled white lotuses in the *ālpānā* and how to chisel designs on stone and make molds of clay. Being deeply meditative she used to say to the girls to chant the name ‘*Bharatvarsha* - the Mother- repeatedly. Swamiji believed that real education is needed for national development. To awaken the religious consciousness through the manifestation of the divinity within would select the way to go towards Universal Good. During that period, Hindu society did not allow any unmarried girl to lead her life as an educationist. So Nivedita planned that widows from early age and orphan girls would be taught and trained up in such way that they would bear the responsibility to spread education among others in future. To them field of service will be their own house, only bond will be their religion and their love will be for their master, nation and people of the country. In this plan education of woman and liberation of them are equally significant. Nivedita thus paid her sacred offerings to Vivekananda, her Acharya, a life full of sacrifice through her mighty work to build up national basis of women’s education. Everything was going on smoothly but sudden incident of Vivekananda’s passing into eternity had a mighty blow in Nivedita’s life. She started to go ahead for nation making alone. .

Nivedita’s mission was to create an idea, in tune with Swamiji’s. She only changed from Swamiji’s ‘man-making’ task to ‘nation-making’. Vivekananda’s idealism was vast and unfathomable, but Nivedita realized that something more concrete was necessary. In the words of Nivedita, “Swami is the only person I know, who goes to the root of the matter- national man-making and I do not know if Swamiji never formulates all this other.”<sup>9</sup> Though Vivekananda never used the word nation or nation-making or nationality, these words become the key notes of all his thinking, writing and speaking. ‘Nationality is the inherent qualities of a nation’ - this concept of Nivedita was developed from her master. She listened about India in detail, her heritage, her spiritual strength from Vivekananda and she was astonished with the great horizontal and deep thoughts of Swamiji about India. Nivedita had also the living experience of the people of India. Vivekananda used to say that

religion is the life of India and national integration is possible only through integration of spiritual power of India. Patriotism should reach to the level of worship. Inner strength of India lies in her spirituality. Swamiji said, “Man making is my mission” and Nivedita said, “It is national man-making”. Nivedita was optimistic like her master who had many times expressed his conviction that India was not old and effete, as her critics had supposed, but young, ripe with potentiality and standing, at beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the threshold of even greater developments than she had known in the past.

Nivedita could not accept any of the interpretations of social reform, political agitation, religious movements or economic grievances. She knew these to be each a part behind which lay a greater reality dominating and coordinating the whole idea of the Indian nationhood. Explaining it she said, “It begins to be thought that there is a religious idea that may be called Indian, but it is of no single sect; that there is a social idea, which is the property of no cast or group; that there is a historic evolution, in which all are united; that it is a thing within all these which alone is to be called India.”<sup>10</sup> Nivedita realized that India contained sufficient forces of recovery within her and took interest in national awakening in all its aspects. She was a great intellectual and moral force that had come down to us in a time of great national need. The renowned economist Benay Sarkar said that she was “The philosopher of Romantic nationalism and aggressive Indianism.” In the words of Rashbihari Ghose who presided over the memorial meeting held at the Town Hall after Nivedita’s death, “If the dry bones are beginning to stir, it is because Sister Nivedita breathed the breath of life into them.”<sup>11</sup>

Indian culture is based on oneness of Truth. The world is the manifestation of one infinite all pervading divine spirit. Our aim is to realize that one divine spirit both in our personal life and in the life of community and make a peaceful environment. We need a good assimilation of various cultures in different parts of the country. Nationality, according to Nivedita, is a great sacred idea and she wanted the revival of civic ideal among people. She wrote in *The Civic Ideal*, “... the elements of nationality are civic and to these civic components it is that the individual stands most directly and most permanently related.”<sup>12</sup> We may do our duties to our nation if we can come out of our narrow selfishness. We will be fit for our national responsibility

through our examination of civic duties. In her words, “The man will suffer some slight risk and discomfort for national good, is not the man to whom to entrust the banner of an army. By civic duty we are tested for national responsibilities.”<sup>13</sup> Nivedita preferred the word ‘Self-organization’ more than ‘Regeneration,’ because India has all sorts of qualities like self sacrifice, high ideals of reverence and love. What India needs today is the actualization of these ideals and national integration. Religion should not be the matter of conflict because harmony of religions has already been established by Ramakrishna- Vivekananda as a great ideal.

Indian art was yet another field in which Nivedita’s contribution was no less remarkable. It would not be an exaggeration to say that her name will ever shine in the history of the revival of the ancient Indian Art of the Ajanta, Rajput and Mogul styles. She was not an artist, but her inspiration, encouragement and guidance helped many young artists to tread the obliterated tracks of ancient Indian Art. She believed that the re-birth of art was essential to the remaking of the nation. Her appreciation of the ideals of Indian art and her passion for its revival were derived from Swami Vivekananda. In the Paris conference of 1900 the Swami gave a brilliant exposition of Indian art and dilated on the controversial subjects of Greek influence on Indian art, science, literature and culture. He proved that the views of the Western orientalist on these subjects were shallow and biased. Nivedita was convinced of the Swami’s views and latter became one of the chief critics of the theory of the Hellenic influence on Indian art. Nivedita first made Mr. Havell in 1902 and was glad to know that Mr. Havel’s view about Indian Art was very similar with her own. After all she made him understand the view points of Indian aesthetics and philosophy of art. Mr. Havell was the first foreigner to point out that Indian art was original and was not derived from Greece. He declared in his book, ‘Indian Sculpture and Painting’, “The Greeks no more created Indian Sculpture and painting than they created Indian philosophy and religion.”<sup>14</sup>

The other important contribution of Nivedita was to define the function of the Art schools in India. Besides Calcutta, there were Art schools in Madras, Travancore, Lahore and Bombay where the teachers were from abroad. The function of the Art school in India was not to introduce European methods and ideals but to gather and revitalize the Indian traditions which were rapidly approaching towards extinction

and to relate the work of Indian craftsman to the life and thought of the Indians. When Nivedita came in contact with Mr. Abanindranath Tagore, the Vice-Principal of the Calcutta Art School, she saw that he too was imbued with foreign ideals. Due to Nivedita's influence he later turned to the Indian style. He acknowledged that she had opened the eyes of Indians to the beautiful aspects of their own country, their own art and their own institutions. Her strong and clear visions of Renaissance in art always appeal to him. <sup>15</sup>Nivedita was full of praise for Abanindranath when he adopted the Indian style. When he painted *Bharat Mata* she was in ecstasy and wrote "We see in this drawing something for which Indian Art has long been waiting, the birth of the idea of those new combinations which are to make the modern age in India."<sup>16</sup> Nivedita made a wonderful synthesis between Western art and Indian art. In order to demonstrate the true ideals of western art she got reprints of good paintings, mostly religious ones and got them printed in the *Modern Review* with critical notes. These were also translated into Bengali and published in the *Prabasi*. Thus she made Indians familiar with great Western masters like Raphael, Michel Angelo, Millet Rossetti, Titian, Morris and Burne Jones etc. <sup>17</sup>

Another glorious contribution of Nivedita we find is in the field of science. In 1900, Jagadish Ch. Bose was invited to the International Congress of Physics arranged at Paris Exhibition. Bose made a presentation on 'Response of Inorganic and living matter'. Both Swami Vivekananda and Nivedita attended the Congress and were happy and proud of Bose's achievements. From that time the great scientist Bose was known to Nivedita. It is well known that a section of British Scientist went against Bose and played foul with him that his papers were not published but 'shelved' and stolen. Nivedita was a witness to the regular tussle with the British and she stood by him in all his struggles because she understood clearly that Indians were not incapable of doing great things but their obstacle to proceed caused from the British. Between 1902 and 1907 she helped Bose in writing the books: *Living and Non-Living, Plant Response and Comparative Electro Physiology and Irritability of Plants*.

Nivedita was greatly interested in the revival of all intellectual advances made by India especially in the advance of modern science. Her desire was to see a Research Institute opened in India which would give the Indian scientist the

necessary help to continue their scientific investigations. Nivedita was also a great thinker on Sociology and Economics which was known from many of her articles on India Political Economy from a point of view different from that of the West. Some prominent figures of the age like Gurudas Banerjee, Rashbihari Ghose, Brajendranath Seal, P.C. Ray, Aswini Kumar Dutta, NilRatan sarkar, Ananda Mohan Bose, Bhupendra Nath Bose, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Surendra Nath Banerjee, and Sarojini Naidu came to know about her and appreciate her love for the country.

### III

Nivedita was a versatile genius. Her talented works in the field of science, literature, journalism, philosophy, history, economics, politics, sociology and others pleased all of. Her active participation in freedom movement, her mission to revive Indian culture along with modern science and her intense love and respect for India made Nivedita an excellent and dynamic spirit. This helped her to begin intercultural movement to establish an example of synthesis between the East and the West on the basis of Universal love and sacrifice. She moulded herself into Indian culture with a strong conviction of Western attitude of accepting Truth with scientific reasoning. Her *The Web of Indian Life* describes India from inside and she was inspired by *Gītā* and *The Lectures of Swami Vivekananda*. The awakening of illumination in India was actively affected by her massive work in the field of womens' education and to build up the nation on the revival of culture and values.

It is our great tension today that human civilization all over the world undergoes with a crisis of peace and erosion of value. A materialistic approach of life is going to be over-flowed and that will perish all our inner wealth of respect, love and harmony. The great continent in the world is ambitious for more power with atomic energy for destruction of human civilizations for their own self-interest. But desire, demand, craving, sensation, passion selfishness, pride, arrogance, lust, greed, jealousy, envy are our enemies as they are hostile to truth. Constant longing towards the Divine, aspiration to awake, intense will to develop work culture, desire for intercultural communication throughout the world may transform the present situation of extreme crisis to a peaceful society today. Sister Nivedita's life of sacrifice, dedication, extraordinary courage to do the needful and her spirit to fight against injustice may be the lamp to the whole human race of the world.



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