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## NIVEDITA : THE LADY WITH THE LAMP-AN INCARNATION OF EMPOWERED WOMAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper tries to bring out the life, role and activities of Sister Nivedita. She organized and opened a girls' school with a desire in mind to educate girls' believing that education for Indian girls should combine traditional Indian values—epitomized by the “family ideal”—and the development of a world view through the study of history, geography, and science, forming the core of the “citizen ideal”. In a short stay in India of about 14 years, between 1897 and 1911, Nivedita made lasting contribution to the major fields of national action that defined the early nationalist movement. She being a dedicated social worker played a pivotal role during the plague epidemic in Calcutta. She designed a prototype of the national flag with the ‘vajra’ at the centre and wrote a detailed exposition of the centrality and power of that symbol both in Hinduism and Buddhism. There must be no foreigner like Sister Nivedita, who has loved India unconditionally and became a role model to Indian society. As a devoted disciple she was supreme. As a metaphysician, she was an avid reader of the mystery of the universe. As an author, she was incomparable. As a revolutionary, she was fearless. With a deep understanding of science, as a scientific minded philosopher, she was the grandest. As a social worker, she was unparalleled. From embroidery to modern science she was interested in all that is the best.*

*Now we can pay our greatest tribute to Loka mata Nivedita to recognize, re-evaluate her life and work as an incarnation of empowered woman.*

**Key words:** citizen ideal, educationist, revolutionary, dedicated to God, vajra, nationality, incarnation, empowered

**Introduction:**

Sister Nivedita (1867 - 1911) was a versatile genius, an incredible educationist, a patriot. The most regarded disciple of Swami Vivekananda, she was a revolutionary, lover of modern science, all arts, and philosophy and stood for emancipation of Indian Women. She was a true champion of India, its finest minds, its achievements and its culture.

**Origin:**

Swami Vivekananda was the most celebrated disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who preached the world secularism, respect for all religions, paths of wisdom, devotion, and respect for woman.

The objective of the Ramakrishna Mission under the magical inspiration and wise teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Deva in a language true to the understanding of a large number of commoners and the inspirational role of Vivekananda as a superb organizer enabled the organization to grow in leaps and bounds across the world. The organization was established on May 1, 1897 and apart from preaching the glorious role of spiritualism, it also adopted certain laudable roles like spreading education, deliverance of health care and social welfare for the downtrodden, poor villagers and members of the depressed castes. The spread of education became one of the important roles of the Ramakrishna Mission and Vivekananda used to say repeatedly, “man-making is my mission through education”[1].

Vivekananda believed that religion should provide an incessant service to humanity and the Ramakrishna Mission should never budge from this mission. His devotion to the cause of humanity was always exemplary and his commitment to educate the Indian masses, especially Indian women, was indeed beyond comparison. His tremendous attraction to Margaret from the moment he could see her might be due to her equally deepest possible commitment towards the spread of education, especially education of the tiny tots. Margaret set up a primary educational centre at Wimbledon, about 40 km from London, and developed wonderful techniques of

teaching. She used to watch the activities of the toddlers without letting them know that all their activities were discreetly observed by her in order to carefully assess their intrinsic potential. This gave her a far-reaching insight regarding their potential in order to assume what future occupation a child should adopt. Margaret used to provide clay, balls, coloured threads, strings etc. by following the methods of teaching propounded by Maria Montessori and Froebel. In this way Margaret imparted a unique and new method of teaching —the Playway to educate the greenhorns. There was no pressure, no hard and fast imposition and no scope to set up a syllabus-based teaching leading to a very unhealthy practice of ill-educated parenting, these days known as ‘helicopter parenting’. She could be described as one of the harbingers of the Montessori education system.

According to Swamiji,

"Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman—a real lioness—to work for Indians, women especially. India cannot yet produce great women; she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted." [1] Swami Vivekananda could foresee her future role in India and narrated to her the pitiable condition of the women in India. He was a great visionary of India and his thoughts were based on 'look forward' visions. Presently, condition of women is in progress. In comparison, conditions are same in proportionate to the growth of population. To improve upon the condition of women under the British rule, she was chosen for the role of educating Indian women.

**Initiation as Nivedita:** Noble received diksha (initiation) from Swamiji into a life of spirituality and service. She was given the name Nivedita—"the offered one" or "Dedicated to God". She became the first Western woman to be received into an Indian monastic order. They, along with a few others, also undertook a five-month journey across the northern and western parts of the country, during which Swami Vivekananda spoke on religion, history, geography and ethnology. In India, she found her soul's home and destiny.

Nivedita noted that her mentor was fascinated with every phase of India's long history, and with all the diverse elements that were interwoven in its tapestry. In 'The Master As I Saw Him', she wrote of her guru:-"In these talks of his, the heroism of the Rajput, the faith of the Sikh, the courage of the Mahratta, the devotion of the saints, and the purity and steadfastness of noble women, all lived again. Nor would he permit that the Mohammedan should be passed over. Humayoon, Sher Shah, Akbar, Shah Jehan, each of these, and a hundred more, found a day and a place in his bead-roll of glistening names." [8]

Swami Vivekananda told,- "Go thou and follow Him, Who was born and gave His life for others five hundred times before He attained the vision of the Buddha." [1]

Swamiji wanted that under her care, the women of India especially in Calcutta be looked after to improve upon their health and education. She did kept her Guru's wishes.

Swamiji was elaborating ancient wisdom of the Upanishads and Vedanta - "Friends, your church is true, our temples are true; and true is brahman, formless and eternal, beyond the two. Time has come when nations would exchange their spiritual ideals as treasures, as they are already exchanging the commodities in the market. These ideals are but various impressions in different modes of manifestation of the One. 'All these are threaded upon me, like pearls upon a string,' so says the Lord in 'The Gita'. Love is the highest virtue, love knows of giving alone, never expecting anything in return. Love God, but don't barter worldly pleasures and comforts in exchange for that." [1]

Further the Swamiji exhorted:-"Try not to accept the report of senses, for both mind and senses are but incomplete expressions of the transcendental third, the Self. Turning our faith in realization of that Self is religion. Karma, *Bhakti*, and Jnana are but three paths to this end. And common to all the three is renunciation. Renounce the desires, even of going to heaven, for every desire related with body and mind creates bondage. Our focus of action is neither to save the humanity nor to engage in social reforms, not to seek personal gains, but to realize the indwelling Self itself. Renunciation points to turning away from the world in search of this Self". [1]

And Margaret Noble, listened to every word, every idea, and every concept that was unique to her, new to her. Those words were full with deep meaning about true religion; words sweet yet foreign to this educated, literate, bold, and intelligent lady. Initially her ego resisted accepting what the Swamiji said, but finally she became his earnest disciple and India possessed a woman of dignity, poise, virtue, outstanding teaching caliber, a visionary, and all that is best in the world.

In a dark age, when women were exploited, had no access to education, married while still were in innocent childhood, she as light with indomitable courage and integrity tried to uplift not with western views but with an Indian outlook.

### **Works:**

She organized and opened a girls' school with a desire in mind to educate girls' especially Hindu widows whose lives turned disgraceful. On 13 November 1898, on the day of Kali Puja, at 16 Bosepara Lane in the Bagbazar area of Calcutta, she started the school. The school was inaugurated by Sarada Devi, in the presence of Swami Vivekananda and some of the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Her first meeting with Sarada Devi was a great surprise for her. She greeted Nivadita affectionately as my daughter. Nivedita was the closest associates of Sarada Ma. The Holy Mother Sarada Devi came to open the school and blessed saying, 'I pray that the blessings of the Divine Mother may be upon the school and the girls; and the girls trained from the school may become ideal girls.' [6]

Nivedita's respect to Sarada Devi reflected as, "She really is, under the simplest, most unassuming guise, one of the strongest and greatest of women." [3]

Her dedication was so much for a cause that she used to visit the houses to pursue the girls to join her school. Sister Nivedita always tried to educate her students with the nationalist spirit. She introduced singing of 'Vande Mâtaram' in her school as a prayer. She believed that education for Indian girls should combine traditional Indian values—epitomized by the “family ideal”—and the development of a world view through the study of history, geography, and science (she considered these subjects to be the foundation of modern education), forming the core of the “citizen ideal”. [9]

To introduce Sister Nivedita to the local people, in his speech Swami Vivekananda said – "England has sent us another gift in Miss Margaret Noble." [1]

She being a dedicated social worker played a pivotal role during the plague epidemic in Calcutta. She brought famine relief to the most deprived ones, and improved the dreadful sanitary conditions, breeding grounds for the plague. Nursed and took care of the poor patients. She helped to clear rubbish from the area. She inspired and motivated youths to render voluntary services. She was a social worker, teacher and author. In fact she was inspired from her father and college teachers that service to mankind is the true service to God.

Her open confession in a letter-

"Suppose he had not come to London that time! Life would have been like a headless dream; for I always knew that I was waiting for something. I always said that a call would come. And it did. But if I had known more of life, I doubt whether, when the time came, I should certainly have recognized it. Fortunately, I knew little and was spared that torture....Always I had this burning voice within, but nothing to utter. How often and often I sat down, pen in hand, to speak, and there was no speech! And now there is no end to it! As surely I am fitted to my world, so surely is my world in need of me, waiting – ready. The arrow has found its place in the bow. But if he had not come! If he had meditated, on the Himalayan peaks! I, for one, had never been here." [2]

Very few westerners before her must have regarded Indian women and admired her as she did. According to her-

"India is, above all others, the land of great women. Wherever we turn, whether to history or literature, we are met on every hand by those figures, whose strength she mothered and recognized, while she keeps their memory eternally sacred." [2]

She also said, "What is the type of woman we most admire? Is she strong, resourceful, inspired, and fit for moments of crisis? Have we not Padmini or Chetore, Chand Bibi, Jhansi Rani? Is she saintly a poet, and a mystic? Is there not Meera Bai? Is she the queen, great in administration? Where is Rani Bhowani, where Ahalya Bai, where Jahnabi of Mymensingh? Is it wife-hood in which we deem that woman shine brightest? What of Sati, of Savitri, of the ever glorious Sita? Is it in maidenhood? There is Uma. And where in all the womanhood of the world, shall be found another as grand as Gandhari?" [2]

Sarada Devi once said, "What sincere devotion Nivedita had! She never considered anything too much that she might do for me. She would often come to see me at night. Once seeing that light struck my eyes, she put a shade of paper around the lamp. She would prostrate herself before me and, with great tenderness, take the dust of my feet with her handkerchief." [6]

But unfortunately, as Nivedita's contribution to the creation of the "idea of India", or her corpus of work on as varied and intricate subjects as cultural history, education, civic nationalism, cleanliness, women education and empowerment, art, historiography, religious debates, Swadeshi and much more remain largely unexplored or unfathomed.

Her house in Calcutta was a centre of cultural activity. Freedom fighter like Aurobindo Ghosh, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Balgangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, Jagadish Chandra Bose and his wife often visited her house. Topic of discussion was on philosophy and politics under British rule. Later on she took up the cause of Indian independence. She was opposed to brutality of British rule. She wished that India should gain independence from British to prosper. She devoted wholeheartedly to the cause of Indian Independent.

She designed a prototype of the national flag with the 'vajra' [5] at the centre and wrote a detailed exposition of the centrality and power of that symbol both in Hinduism and Buddhism. Her significance for the 'vajra' was striking: "The selfless man is the thunderbolt" [3] for national action. It was that lightning like selflessness which needed to be cultivated among workers of Indian freedom. Nivedita herself often embodied that thunder-like presence, imbued from her master — her father as she often called Swami Vivekananda.

She had this design embroidered by the girls of her Calcutta school and it was displayed at an exhibition organized by the Indian National Congress in 1906 in Calcutta. Eminent Indians like J.C. Bose (who later made it the emblem of his Bose Institute in Calcutta) started using it, and this idea was also later reflected in the design of India's highest military decoration, the Param-Vir-Chakra.

In a short stay in India of about 14 years, between 1897 and 1911, Nivedita made lasting contribution to the major fields of national action that defined the early nationalist movement. Be it national education, be it the Swadeshi art and industrial movement, be it sustaining the revolutionary movement or providing succor to the revolutionary nationalists, be it supporting Indian scientific research as she did in the case of Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, ensuring that

he continues with his path-breaking research and stands up to British, or colonial hegemony, and prove the point of Indian capacities in science and scientific research, Nivedita's imprint is hard to ignore, especially, if one were to disengage oneself from dialectical lenses while studying this phase of India's evolution. Rabindranath Tagore said: "In the day of his success, Jagadish gained an invaluable energizer and helper in Sister Nivedita, and in any record of his life's work her name must be given a place of honor." [7]

One who was so intricately and intrinsically identified with India's civilisational aspirations, one who so eagerly embraced the Hindu way of life, one who so minutely detailed the civilisational contributions of Hinduism — both in terms of history and religion, her 'Cradle Tales of Hinduism', 'Footfalls of Indian History' and especially 'Kali the Mother' was staple read once upon a time all over Bengal and other parts of India, while making a great impact abroad in countering false propaganda against the Indian way of life — could not be stereotyped — it was plain impossible.

So at ease and so accepted was she that Nivedita could easily speak at the temple of Kalighat on Kali and describe her centrality in the evolution of Indian religious experience. For her, India never need be apologetic — this same uncompromising nationalism saw her take on missionary calumny against India on foreign shores. One who simply said, when asked what she would do in India that "My life is given to India. In it I shall live and die", [3] or who, in her daily aspiration meant for nationalists wrote thus, "I believe that India is one, indissoluble, indivisible" [3] and that "National unity is built on the common home, the common interest and common love" [3] and that the "strength which spoke in the Vedas and Upanishads, in the making of religion and empires, in the learning of scholars, and the meditation of the saints, is born once more amongst, and its name today is nationality" [3] and one who believed that "the present of India is deep-rooted in her past, and that before her shines a glorious future", [3]

She edited 'Karma Yogin', the nationalist newspaper of Sri Aurobindo. Her respect for India proved with her editorial,

"The whole history of the world shows that the Indian intellect is second to none. This must be proved by the performance of a task beyond the power of others, the seizing of the first place in the intellectual advance of the world. Is there any inherent weakness that would make it

impossible for us to do this? Are the countrymen of Bhaskaracharya and Shankaracharya inferior to the countrymen of Newton and Darwin? We trust not. It is for us, by the power of our thought, to break down the iron walls of opposition that confront us, and to seize and enjoy the intellectual sovereignty of the world."[3]

She loved India unconditionally and became a role model to Indian society. There must be no foreigner like Sister Nivedita, who has loved India. She worked selflessly for the development of Indian society.

She decided to translate Vivekananda's concept of "man-making" into "nation-building". She began channeling her efforts into introducing a conception of "nationality" (the term she used) to India, instilling it in the hearts and minds of people. Her definition of nationality meant people would feel for this land as their spiritual home, identifying with it, making it an essential part of the citizen's self-concept, an extension of the self. To her, this was the highest form of nationality, one that did not rely merely on the political view of the nation based on the citizen-state dynamic.

As a devoted disciple she was supreme. As a metaphysician, she was an avid reader of the mystery of the universe. As an author, she was incomparable. As a revolutionary, she was fearless. With a deep understanding of science, as a scientific minded philosopher, she was the grandest. As a social worker, she was unparalleled. From embroidery to modern science she was interested in all that is the best. Her students guided by her, didn't embroidered just a sari but the Indian flag. She herself designed the National Flag. Her personality had all hues of a rainbow - her deep interest in science, metaphysics, art, and culture. A philosopher, author, nationalist, and revolutionary she churned the curd, left the buttermilk and tasted only the butter. Her life is a metaphor of all that best in the world, as she comprehended the unlimited in her limited body. Though the entire world is familiar with Swami Vivekananda and Nivedita's great respect and admiration for each other, it is interesting to know that Rabindranath Tagore too had great regard for this versatile genius and referred to her as "Loka-Mata" (Mother of the People).

### **Tribute and admiration:**

Sister Nivedita was held in high regard by Rabindranath Tagore, who felt Nivedita to be an exceptional soul. Though they had met quite a number of times, they never worked together and thus Tagore had written,—"I had felt her great power, but with all that I understood that her path was not for me. She was a versatile genius, and there was another thing in her nature; that was her militancy. She had power and she exerted that power with full force on the lives of others. When it was not possible to agree with her, it was impossible to work with her." [6]

To meet her, in Gokhale's words, was "like coming in contact with some great force of nature" [9]. The great Tamil nationalist poet Subramania Bharati, who met Nivedita only once, considered her his guru, writing that she "showed me the form of Bharat Mata in its completeness and taught me to love my country" [9]. To portray such an extraordinary personality in a few pages is indeed an uphill task. Her extraordinary appearance with impeccably described by Mr. A.J. F. Blair,—"A tall, robust woman in the very prime of life. Her face in repose was almost plain. The cheekbones were high and the jaws were supreme. The face at the first glance expressed energy and determination, but you would hardly have looked at it again but for the forehead and the eyes. The eyes were a calm, deep blue, and literally lit up the whole countenance." [6]

Mr. Nevinson had paid tribute in following wonderful lines,

"It is as vain to describe Sister Nivedita in two pages as to reduce fire to a formula and call it knowledge. There was, indeed, something flame-like about her, and not only her language but her whole vital personality often reminded me of fire. Like fire, and like Shiva, Kali, and other Indian powers of the spirit, she was once destructive and creative, terrible and beneficent." [4]

She was indeed a combination of keen intellect and noble heart. No wonder the most celebrated Indian artist, Abanindranath Tagore visualized her as an ideal of beauty and considered her as 'meditating Uma' [6].

### **The lady with the lamp:**

This hard work started having adverse effects on her health. Sister Nivedita was born on 28 Oct 1867 in Ireland and died on 13 Oct 1911 as the age of 43 years in Darjeeling, West Bengal. To

respect the daughter of the soil, a samdhi was raised later over the sacred spot where she was cremated. In the lap of her favorite Himalayas rested the supreme soul and the memorial states, “Here reposes Sister Nivedita who gave all to India.”[9]

Indeed she gave her all to her India, the land Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Ma Sharada, Swami Vivekananda and the land of all religions.

On her last night, she said to the Boses, “The boat is sinking but I shall yet see the sun rise”[9]. It was just after dawn that she uttered the famous verse from the ‘Brihadaranyaka Upanishad’ – ‘Asato ma sadgamay, tamaso ma jyotirgamay, mrityorma amritam gamay’ – and passed away.[2] At the Bose Institute is placed the bas-relief of a woman with prayer beads and a lamp in her hand, designed by Maharashtrian sculptor Vinayak Pandurang Karmakar, modelled on the famous painting of Nivedita by Nandalal Bose (himself in many ways a protégé of Nivedita), called ‘The lady with the lamp’. A portion of Nivedita’s ashes are also kept there.

Above all, perhaps had it not been for Nivedita, we would not have discovered that Vivekananda which even the most conscientious biographer fails to capture. Who else but Nivedita, herself profoundly and unalterably identified with Bharat, could have written about the master thus, “There was one thing however, deep in the master’s nature, that he himself never knew how to adjust? This was his love of his country and his resentment at her suffering. Throughout those years in which I saw him almost daily, the thought of India was to him like the air he breathed.”[9]

### **Conclusion:**

After the celebration of her 150th birth anniversary one would do well to recognize, re-evaluate her life and work and to rekindle a deeper and wider interest in Sister Nivedita as an incarnation of empowered woman. That would, in a sense, be a tribute of gratefulness to her as ‘Loka-mata’.

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