

# Indian Women and Sister Nivedita: A Campaigner of Female Education

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**Abstract** —The word sustainable means capable of being maintained or continued at a certain level. Development of a sustainable world depends on the progression and thriving of the human race. Human is comprised of both men and women. However, the latter has generally been silenced, disregarded, deprived and ignored. Now a day, the term women empowerment is widely used to enhance the status of women by giving them the opportunity to manage their lives and take their own decisions. Education is an essential prerequisite for their empowerment. Gender equality and women empowerment is indispensable for sustainable expansion. In this context, this paper aims to focus on the dreams of Sister Nivedita about the future of her Indian daughters. Sister Nivedita believed that what India needed was education ‘more and deeper than any she had attained.’ Real education was self education. Education should not accentuate on individual growth but emphasize on the overall development of society and community. Women should be enabled to think about India. She should be prepared in such a way so that the world would feel proud to be associated with her. An Indian woman should not imitate an American or English woman. She should be Indianised before she would contribute for the nation. An educated woman would make a better home. Science, geography and history were, according to Nivedita, the three components of modern education. Women should widen their intellectual capacity in these three disciplines as men. The school should be an integral part of life for both an Indian boy and an Indian girl. Women education should aspire to broaden their mental and spiritual excellence simultaneously. Importance should be attached to training in handicrafts and varied physical professions keeping in mind India’s traditional art heritage. To this day, when Indian women are victims of violence, atrocities, ignorance, illiteracy and devoid of freedom, Sister Nivedita’s ideals and reflections on Indian women is pertinent even today and pursuing her vision would facilitate to construct a regenerated motherland with women taking a leading role in education and policy making.

**Keywords:** India, women empowerment, education, Sister Nivedita, Indian women, relevance.

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Many male reformers had sacrificed a lot for the resurgence of Indian women. But the most astonishing part was the task performed by a British woman for the women of an unknown land. She is lovingly and appreciatively remembered still today by the innumerable Indians as “Sister Nivedita.” ‘The story of how she, an alien, did this is as fascinating as it is one of the most stirring, if less known, chapters of Indian history (Swami, Lokeshwarananda, 2016). Her ardent intelligence and compassionate heart under the supervision and care of Swami Vivekananda, began to reverberate with the hopes and feelings of Indian women. Her efforts were dedicated for “Bharatmata” or the motherland. She was an educator, a loving mother, a determined worker, an obedient student and a great leader. Her contributions in education, literature, science, arts and politics of the Motherland will remain unexcelled in Indian history.

Swami Vivekananda was convinced that the present degeneration of India was not due to religion but because of the present condition of Indian women. He firmly believed that the regeneration of India would be a mere utopia without the welfare of women. He had thus stated:

“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved.” (Pravrajika Jnanadaprana et al., 1998).

He had repeatedly stated that India’s descent was mostly due to neglect of her women. The mid-nineteenth century India saw women, the great mother- power, shackled and degenerated to a mere child producing machines (Swami Jitatananda, 1998). The great national sin had been the disregard of Indian women. No politics or religion would be of any avail until the women folk in India were once more well fed and well cared for. Until and unless, women education was started in full swing, the country would remain where it had been for the last few centuries (Swami Gambhirananda, 1980). He was familiar with the hidden strength inherent in Indian women which if aroused would uplift the entire nation. By 1894, Swami Vivekananda’s

ideas and thoughts regarding a women's movement had turned into a resolute plan of action. He realized that education was the only way that would enable women to attain worldly excellence and spiritual realization (Pravrajika Jnanadaprana et al., 1998).

Margaret Elizabeth Noble was born on October 28, 1867 in North Ireland. Her father Reverend Samuel Richmond believed that one day a great call for noble spiritual service would come to her. After attending the lectures of Swami Vivekananda, she accepted Him as her Master. Swamiji visualized her as "the lioness" who would be able to execute His plans on education of Indian women. He had written to Miss Noble on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1896:

"The earth's bravest and the best will have to sacrifice themselves for the good of many, for the welfare of all. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. Bold words and bolder deeds are what we want." (Pravrajika Jnanadaprana & Pravrajika et al., 1998).

Swamiji had written two letters on 6<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1897 to the editor of 'Bharati' newspaper where He had stated that the only way to rescue the country from collapse was through women's regeneration and education of both the sexes. He lamented that India had no daughter who could serve the cause. Margaret responded to the heart touching call of her Master (Pravrajika Muktiprana, 1963). Initially Swamiji wished that Margaret should carry forward His programme of preaching Indian Vedanta in the West. But upon Miss Noble's continuous insistence to materialize Swamiji's dreams about Indian women's future education, He wrote to her from Almora on 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1897

"What was wanted was not a man but a woman; a real lioness, to work for the Indians, women specially. India can't yet produce great women; she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination make you just the woman wanted." (Pravrajika Muktiprana, 1963).

England had sent many missionaries to India for propagation of Christianity. Margaret's arrival in India was different from them. She came to the country not for the spread of religion but for serving the motherland selflessly and sacrificing everything for her. Swamiji desired that Margaret should first be acquainted with India and accept her from the core of her heart. She should acclimatize with the Indian women for whom she would dedicate her energy and time. She should fully embrace Indian religion, culture and ethos.

Miss Noble started her journey for India and reached Calcutta on 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1898. In India, Swamiji introduced Margaret with these words:

"Already England has given us some of her great intellectuals to help us in our mission. And now England has sent us another gift in Miss Margaret Noble, from whom we expect much" (Pravrajika Atmaprana, 1961).

On March 29, 1898, Margaret was initiated into Brahmacharya by Swami Vivekananda and given the name "Nivedita".

With regard to moral and personal life, woman played more vital role than man. She had been the determinant factor both at home and the outside world. Nivedita desired an educational method that would be 'quantitatively true and universally applicable to the work of modern education of Indian women' ((Pravrajika Atmaprana, 1961). She opined that until the Indian woman was equipped with education, "the motherland herself stands veiled and ineffective. It is essential for the joyous revealing of that great Mother, that she be first surrounded by the mighty circle of these, Her daughters, the Indian women of the days to come" (Sister Nivedita, 1923). The soul and mind should blossom in a harmonious way with one another. She was attracted by Indian women's grace and sweetness, kindness, devoutness, love, service and sacrifice which should not be compromised for the sake of westernization. In fact Indian women's qualities should be protected from western assault. An education that would uproot women's modesty and tenderness would not be a true education of Eastern women. "All education worth having must first devote itself to the development and consolidation of character and only secondarily concern itself with intellectual accomplishment" (Sister Nivedita, 1923). She wanted them to have better education without giving up their own ideals and practices because she firmly supposed that neither the fashions of the west nor the western education should eradicate Eastern women's reverential humbleness (Bhattacharya, 2017).

National reconstruction largely depended on education. The future of India rested upon the educated. A national education would be an education in *national idealism* (Sister Nivedita, 1967). The education that would be envisaged for Indian women should aim at the progress of both the soul and the mind in harmony with one another. The purpose of education is more important than the method of education. India had been adorned with great women whose piety, bravery, holiness and character are source of inspiration for all times. "There can never be any sound education of the Indian women, which does not begin and end in exaltation of the national ideals of womanhood, as embodied in her own history and heroic literature" (

Sister Nivedita, 1923). It was necessary to inculcate the ideals of womanhood before wifehood and further important was to imbibe the ideals of humanity before womanhood. The study of the history of the nation must be emphasized. The knowledge of science, history and geography should be instilled in both men and women. Pictures could be used as a medium for dissemination of knowledge of geography and history as women could not love the motherland unless she can imagine her. Growth of vernacular literature and use of the mother tongue were a pre-condition for spread of women's learning as it would be difficult for many to study the country's history in foreign language. Initially men should come forward for women's education and the latter afterwards would share this responsibility themselves. There should be a profound belief in the future of Indian women so that they would be the living embodiment of the spirit of the Motherland.

Nivedita was convinced that true religion aspires the recognition of the full potential of human nature. Historian Jadunath Sarkar had aptly remarked that Nivedita always thought how to impart true education, national education so that one could become the true sons and daughters of "Bharat-varsha" and not blind imitators of Europe. "Your education should be an education of the heart and of the spirit, as much of the brain; it should be a living connection between yourselves and your past as well as the modern world" (Jadunath Sarkar, 'Notes', Modern Review, November, 1911 in Bhattacharya, 2017).

On 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1898, at a meeting held in Balaram Bose's house, Nivedita announced her decision to open a school for girls on national ideals. On 13<sup>th</sup> November, on the day of Kali puja, Sarada Ma, inaugurated Nivedita's School at 16, Bosepara lane in Baghbazar, Kolkata. After the puja, the Holy Mother showered her blessings on the school with the prayer that the girls passing out from this school would be the ideal girls of the future. The school started its work from 14<sup>th</sup> November with few girls from the neighbourhood. Girls were taught reading, writing, painting, clay work and sewing. Nivedita's simple lifestyle and identifying herself as one with the local people helped her to overcome native hostility and reluctance. Swami Saradananda had written in the school prospectus

"the pure and simple life of its Mistress soon endeared her to the ladies around, who gradually began to look at her as one of their own" (Pravrajika Jnanadaprana et al., 1998).

The kindergarten method was followed in the school where Bengali, English, Mathematics and Elementary Science, handicraft were taught with emphasis on old Indian crafts so that girls could earn their livelihood without leaving their home. True teaching was always self teaching as no one could really be taught by another. India's Dharma embodied everything. Education should strive to make an individual efficient in his community and the community should labor for humanity. Real education would train women in such a way that the greatest men of the world would feel proud to be associated with her. School will put all its efforts to acquaint her daughters with the country and its culture. "Certainly no eye as yet has gathered the full glory of India, as the Indian woman of the future will gather it." (Sister Nivedita, 1975).

Women should be taught about the past. She should look at the past with a 'discriminating eye and testing heart.' An Indian woman should not blindly replicate American or English woman. She should be Indianised before she would contribute for the nation. "Everywhere it is the first duty to convince the Indian girl in her heart, her conscience, her intellect and her will that she is Indian indeed, and not a foreigner" (Sister Nivedita, 1975). An educated woman would be more responsible than an uneducated woman. Submission was the characteristic of the uneducated and Responsibility was the feature of the educated. According to her, scientific ideas, geographical impressions and historical knowledge were the three characteristics of modern education. Reiterating her Master, Nivedita believed that without the unity of both the sexes in the affairs of life, life would be crippled and devoid of spiritual and material growth. "Humanity is only complete in the two fold organ, the feminine mind united with the masculine, and neither alone" (Sister Nivedita, 1975).

Eastern women should have the passion for knowledge for both religious and secular matters. The school and the home were not antagonistic to each other but were separate elements in a single complex whole. Women should fill up the art with their imagination and tenderness. They were adept in craft and needle work. Instead of duplication of the European patterns, Indian women should pursue the traditional style and themes. Indian women should be introduced to varied manual occupations. She must understand what the Indian ideals were and how to achieve them. Impressed by the handicraft works of the girls, Nivedita wrote to Mrs. Bull,

"I find the children here have as much artistic power as any I ever saw. This brushwork was wonderfully good considering their chances and their colour is excellent. And how they love sewing and manual occupation, you cannot just imagine" (Pravrajika Atmaprana, 1961).

Nivedita had a profound respect for the Eastern women. Their simplicity, patience, selflessness, sacrifice and faithfulness had created civilizations. "It is this patience of the Indian woman, with this her mingling of large power of reverie, that has made and makes the Indian nationality" ( Sister Nivedita, 1967). Indian women's real achievement was seen in wisdom, service and renunciation rather than in power and love. When women would be placed in their actual place, they would be conscious about the needs of the people and work for the land rather than family or village. Then only Indian women could lead the race to its actual greatness and national ideal would be revealed. However reading and writing were not in themselves education. This power should be properly applied. "A woman in whom the great compassion is awakened, a woman who understands the national history, a woman who has a notion of what her country looks like, is much more truly and deeply educated than one who has merely read much."(Sister Nivedita, 1967). Education should not only be national but 'Nation- Making'.

The cause of Indian people especially women, was utmost in Swamiji's mind. He had advised Nivedita that she should be concerned with Women and the People. Women should first be educated and then they would decide what reforms were necessary for them. Nivedita, thus wrote for her Master, " He saw plainly enough that what was wanted was a race of women –educators who would be nothing less than Bashi- Bazouks of religion. And they should work out the problems of women. They should shower all their love for Guru, people and motherland" (Pravrajika Atmaprana, 1961). Swamiji took keen interest on Nivedita's school. He was eager to train Hindu widows and orphans because it was difficult to get unmarried girls as workers. Although the school started at 16 Bosepara lane but later it was shifted to Nivedita's house at 17, Bosepara lane. She had a sympathetic understanding of the children's minds. There were about sixty to seventy students in the school. Nivedita taught them Geography, History, needle- work and drawing. Among the students, there were a few grown up girls who taught the junior girls when the teachers were unavailable. In the small courtyard, she made the girls drill. Strict discipline was enforced in class rooms. She decorated her small room with toys and painting of girls and showed them to all who came to meet her. She would try to awaken the sense of history in her students. Although she could not take her girls to historical trips at places like Puri, Bhuvaneswar, Chittor but she gave vivid descriptions of the places she had visited so that girls could enjoy them and nurture a sense of history. She had arranged to exhibit the pictures of Chittor fort, Taj Mahal and Rani Padmini with the help of magic lantern. She set for short trips of the girls to Dakshineswar by steamer; to the zoo by tram and to the Museum. These excursions were not only outings but educational and left inefaceable impressions upon the fresh young minds.

If the students remained absent, she would visit their houses personally; plead with the guardians for sending their daughters to the school. The school was 'a home of bliss' for the students. Girls eagerly waited to visit the school and meet their dear sister. Her students could never forget the love and tender affection and care their dear sister bestowed upon them. Her pupil's sense of beauty and natural art deeply impressed her. She instilled in her students that they were the daughters of "Bharat-Varsha." She took the girls to listen to the lectures of Bipin Chandra Pal in the park adjoining to Brahma Girls' School. She sent the handicraft works of the students for display in the Swadeshi Exhibition organized by the Indian National Congress in 1906. She appointed an old lady to teach spinning to the girls in the school who lovingly was called as the 'Charka Ma.' She introduced Bande-Mataram as a regular prayer in her school.

Nivedita comprehended that although parents sent their small girls to school, but they would be married of at a very small age of 10 to 12 years. She, therefore, hoped to train the widows and married girls. *Kathakatha* or religious discourses in a folk style were introduced to attract them towards the school. Classes were started in needle work, sewing, reading, writing and religious scriptures. She looked to widows as a class to be trained as 'educational missionaries' who would spread national education among women. She always encouraged the students to stick to the traditional Indian heritage and reminded them about their duties towards the motherland (Pravrajika Shradhprana, 1967). She made the girls stitch the design of the National Flag on Murshidabad silk. She had relentlessly endeavoured to kindle the spirit of nationalism and reverence for national culture and art among her students. The girls counted with the help of tamarind seeds, painted *alpana* drawings, made Indian designs in embroidery in the class. All these kept them in their familiar surroundings while learning the skills.

Nivedita's school was open to both young children as well as ladies of the locality. The ladies section came to be known as Pura –Stree Vibhaga from 1904. Labanya Probha Basu, Pushpa Devi, Mahamaya Devi and Lady Abala Basu took the responsibility of teaching the girls. Nivedita's warmth, quietness, compassion and ability to establish close relations attracted the ladies of the Bosepara lane towards her. On 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1902, a separate School was opened for the elderly ladies which remained open on Monday and Friday in every week. Miss Christine Greenstidel and sister of Jagadish Chandra Basu took up the responsibility of stitching, reading and writing. It was an unprecedented event in Indian history as for the first time married ladies came out of home to receive education. It was clear to the guardians of the students that Sister's school imparted

indigenous education in accordance with Hindu culture and values. After Nivedita's demise, the school was named as 'Shree Ramakrishna Mission Sister Nivedita Girls School.'

While teaching the girls, she always attempted to make them remember that they were the daughters of India and her ideals were their ideals. The people should know only one word i.e. nationality. Such an education should be introduced that would be in tune with women's real life requirements. Besides, English and Bengali language arithmetic and science must be treated as basic subjects. Concurrently, importance should be attached to training in handicrafts and varied physical profession keeping in mind India's traditional art heritage. Girls then would be able to earn their livelihood from house itself. Severe intellectual discipline and anxious knowledge of facts must be added to the delicate grace and deep motherly wisdom of the oriental women (Sister Nivedita, 1975).

Apart from the knowledge of cooking, women should be also trained to carry out their work in the external world for 'strong personal refinement or warm affection' would not be sufficient in facing the exterior domain. Women should not be swayed by the west and emulate it without judgment. Only by visualizing the ideal and struggling for it, a race could rise. Women should work for the country without any expectation of name and fame. One would feel, 'India is all; I am nothing.' Previously, women used to fill a small part in a great whole but now she would create the whole in which her life was a part. This new womanhood would render their opinions on the problems of the future. Only by respecting our women as women that the true dignity of the nation could be build up. Humanity was the blending of female and male components; otherwise life would be barren, cripple and devoid of sacred development.

Swami Vivekananda had blessed Nivedita with the following words--- she had a mother's soul and a valiant's determination. She would be the servant, friend and mother of the future sons of India. 'Be thou to India's future son, Mistress, servant, friend in one.' She had inherited two words from her Guru--- Sacrifice and Service. From the very first day, her life was one consuming effort to one herself with the Indian experience (Ghosh, 2001). She had left her legacy in India's education, art, science, hospitality and politics. A silent and unflagging service to India was her noble swearing. She had sailed to India with a mission to make her Master's vision of educating the women of India veracity. A firm believer in the theory of Petalozzi that a people could be understood only in the light of their own history, Nivedita took pains to read Indian history (Som, 2017). Rabindranath Tagore called her '*Lok Mata*' or the People's Mother. Her motherly feeling extended for all. A deep sense of belongingness was implicit in her utterance of the word 'our people'. Probably no other personality could realize India's problems so intensely as that of Nivedita. Mrs Jagadish Chandra Bose in her reminiscences on Sister Nivedita had acknowledged that this 'protecting motherhood' was a special characteristic of her life. 'She had so completely identified herself with us that I never heard her use phrases like 'Indian need or Indian Women' but it was always Our need, Our Women'' (Sister Nivedita, 1911).

The word sustainable means capable of being maintained or continued at a certain level. Development of a sustainable world depends on the progression and thriving of the human race. Human is comprised of both men and women. However, the latter has generally been silenced, disregarded, deprived and kept behind the veil. India had been engaged to protect women's rights through education since Independence. The Central and the State Government had strived to endow them with education, employment, shelter and ensure gender equity. Women empowerment had become an utmost necessity to encourage women in education, decision making and policy formulations. They must identify their abilities and limitations, have control over their lives, exercise authority to achieve their own goals and help others to attain the same. Women empowerment is a multi faceted concept that helps women to be self-dependent, self-sufficient and enjoy self esteem. Education is the prequalification for women empowerment. But what kind of education is the most beneficial for our women? We are inspired by westernization. Colonialism still influences our mind and soul so that we seek to replicate the Oxident which might prove erroneous. Instead India should adhere to the words and footprints of the Great Souls who had devoted their everything for India and thought only for Her people. The advancement of a community requires the full utilization of the capacity of both men and women. Women should be taught to think more of the country rather than the family. They should be capable of thinking what would ensure the welfare of the nation. Women should awake to receive the knowledge. Women should deal the problems with a nationalistic outlook. Although Nivedita spoke for women's education and worked for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but her basic concepts and postulations on education of Indian women, the methods and purpose of education, predictions on how to ameliorate the position of Indian females is pertinent for all times and if followed would envisage a sustainable development of the nation in the future.

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