



## Sister Nivedita and the Upliftment of Indian Women

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### Abstract

Sister Nivedita was an eminent personality of India. She found the perfect way of life in Swami Vivekananda's ideal. She came from Europe to India only to help the underprivileged Indians. Swamiji gave her the name 'Nivedita'. She worked a lot for women education. Her unusual teaching method and kindness made her school very popular. Nivedita was not only a teacher but also a social reformer. Her contribution to Indian society is remarkable. Generously she dedicates her all life for the progress of India. This paper concentrates on the contribution of Nivedita on women education and her role of a social reformer.

**Keywords:** *women enlightenment, women education, role in Indian society, social reformer*

### 1. Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, a noble-hearted, compassionate, dynamic lady came to India with a dedicated heart to serve for human welfare. She was an Irish lady named Margaret Elizabeth Noble. This generous European lady came to India and took the role of a social reformer. Margaret belonged to a very devout family. Her father was a preacher of Christianity. From her family, she got the ideology of sympathy and kindness. She got the lesson to help the weak and needy people. By profession, she was a teacher. She taught in different schools around Ireland and England. Later she established her own school at Wimbledon in 1892. At her school, she inaugurated a distinctive method of teaching. Here the students play, and they learned lessons while playing. There was an arrangement of education to adults, who wants to acquire the modernized manners of teaching. Her school became very popular for its unique features.

In this phase of her life, she was wandering the way of real existence. After reading the words of Lord Buddha, she got a devotion to the Buddhist religion. She thinks the ideology of Buddha shows her the authentic way to obtain the truth of life. In 1895, she met Swami Vivekananda in London. He was known as 'Hindu Yogi' in England. The eminent and transcendent personality of Swami Vivekananda overwhelmed her. It was a mesmerizing moment for Margaret when she listens to the speech of Swamiji. By hearing to the popularity of Margaret's method of teaching, Swami Vivekananda visited her school at Wimbledon. Swamiji saw a unique enthusiasm in Margaret. Margaret was also touched by Swamiji's lectures and express her wish to work with Swamiji. One day, in a conversation, Swamiji said to Margaret, "I have plans for the women of my own country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me" (Atmaprana 1961). It was the first step of entering the new chapter of Margaret's life. Margaret admitted this moment as 'the turning point' of her life.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

1. Discuss Swami Vivekananda's perspective of women education.
2. Discuss the role of Sister Nivedita impassioned work on women education.
3. Explain Sister Nivedita's devotion to Indian society.

## 3. Discussion

### Women enlightenment in perceptions of Swami Vivekananda:

Swami Vivekananda - an eminent personality of the East, considers education as the root of human progress. "Education, for Vivekananda, is thus a process of self-discovery, self-perfection, self-awareness, and self-manifestation. Education is a life-long process towards the fullest development of human personality" (Rathod 2016). He was very much concerned about the problems of Indian women. According to him, if a nation properly respects women, then the nation will prosper. He admits *Sita* as the ideal women, the symbol of purity. Swamiji did not endorse child marriage. He thinks women should have the ability to solve their problems. When they independently take decisions of their own, then it will be the real Upliftment of women. "The ethical concept of Swami Vivekananda also differs from the traditional western ethics in respect of treating human beings... He treats both of them as Christ. The salutation of Swamiji goes to everyone." (De, 2016)

"Education is The Manifestation of The Perfection Already in Man" - This is a famous and most often quoted quote on education by Swami Vivekananda. It clearly demonstrates the clarity and crispness with which Swami Vivekananda delivered his messages. (Mondal, 2019) He wants to make an education system, which builds the character and mental strength of Indian women. "He often voiced his sentiments by saying that a nation cannot rise if one of the limbs is paralyzed, just as a bird cannot fly with only one wing" (Atmaprana 1961). He realizes that the suffering of Indian women can be ceased only by progressing education to them. Education is an ideal way to improve the vision of society. Women enlightenment could uplift a society from degradation. The inherent qualities can emerge through education. An educated mind can develop self-respect and discover the essence of the real ends of life. He emphasized on power or strength, as the real spirit of a human being. We find in words of Margaret that "...woman had a large inheritance as man, in all the thought and knowledge that formed the peculiar gift of the age to India. There could be no sex in truth" (*Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* 2016). Swamiji perceived an immense devoutness and humanity in Margaret. So he proposed her to work for Indian women.

### Margaret - a devotee of Swami Vivekananda:

Margaret deeply inspired by Swamiji's thought. She decided to work for the women of India and came to India on 28th January 1898. She tried to walk on the footprints of Swamiji. Margaret deeply inspired by Swamiji's thought. She decided to work for the women of India and came to India on 28th January 1898. She tried to walk on the footprints of Swamiji. After reaching India, she stayed in Kolkata. In the guidance of Swami Vivekananda and other monks, she reads a lot about Indian culture and heritage. She studied Epics and Hindu religious books. After some days, Swamiji gave her initiation. After initiation, her name was Nivedita, which means the dedicated one. It was the first in Indian history that a European woman took the vow of Brahmacharya and served as a nun. By hard work, he learned the regional languages of India so that correlating with the general people has not become an obstacle for her. She met Sarada Devi, who became a prominent part of Nivedita's life to understand Indian culture.

### Nivedita's view of women education:

Swami Vivekananda bothered about the miserable condition of Indian women. She requested Nivedita to take the responsibility of their upliftment. Nivedita was a great follower of Swamiji, and she never disobeys his proposal. After reaching Kolkata, she tried to meet the hope of Swamiji. She started a school at Bagbazar for the women education. She knew that this venture is minute but believe that it

will extend in the future. Nivedita noticed that illiteracy and prejudice are two main difficulties of Indian society. This kind of attitude is the main reason for the backwardness of India. Women are also a part of society, so their upliftment is essential for complete progress.

Nivedita noticed a unique quality among Indian women. They untiringly and unselfishly serve their family. The work started in the early morning and continues till night. They sacrifice their own desire and happiness to provide comfort to every member of the family. This tradition of womanhood amazes Nivedita. She noticed devotedness in the nature of Indian women. She attempted to uplift their life but wants to keep the dignity intact. She never wanted to offer the western style of living to the Indian women. She praised their religious spirit and tolerance. Nivedita suggested reading the book of the East. According to her, these pieces of literature can uplift and enrich the mind of women. She desired to keep the purity and innocence of Indian women. According to her, the ideology to respect the elders of the family is a great virtue. She told these not only to the Hindu women but also for the Muslim women. Nivedita called all women as her sisters. She observes that India is a land of diverse religion and considers India as the 'land of adoption'.

According to Nivedita, the future of comprehensive development depends on education. She accepts the role of industry and commerce on the advancement process, but the improvement will be attainable only by knowledgeable individuals. Technical education is important, but advanced research is also required for the progress of the nation. She related technical education without higher research as a branch without a tree, a blossom without any root. The complete progress always needed for a developed nation. She gave importance to human unity. According to her, a united nation will stand sturdy and courageous. Education is the gateway to reach that self-demonstrated state.

### **Establishment of Nivedita's school**

12th November 1898, Nivedita established her school at Bagbazar. It was the school for girls. Sister Christine and Sudhira Devi were teachers at Nivedita's school. At the inauguration day, Sarada Devi was the chief guest. Swami Vivekananda was also present on that day. Three little girls, who had been brought by Swami Sadananda were the earliest students of the school. In the beginning, the school's capital was eight hundred rupees. Most of the students came from underprivileged families. So, they did not bear the expenses of their education, so Nivedita took that responsibility. She collected funds for her school by writing in various papers. Several friends of Nivedita supported her by donating funds.

Vivekananda advised Nivedita, "Let yourself be guided. You are going to learn everything from your pupils" (Reymond 2014). He wanted that Nivedita could know the soul of her students. Girls from the Hindu families would make Nivedita's foundation on Hindu culture. Swamiji's hope was to make Nivedita a perfect personality with the complete knowledge of Hindu culture. If she did not know her student's culture, then she cannot give a complete education to them. That complete education would improve their mind to decide the proper direction of life.

Nivedita teaches Mathematics and Arts. In his teaching, a weak student was able to learn difficult topics. In the Mathematics class, Nivedita asked her students to tell odd or even numbers. In that way, she wanted to improve their memory and thinking power. Nivedita wanted to make her students able that they can independently solve any problem. "She made it a rule that if a girl was unable to answer a question, she would be asked the same question many times in different ways so that she could find the answer for herself" (Bhattacharya 2017). Sister Christine was also a student of Nivedita's painting class. Often in the school, senior students taught the junior ones. She brought her students to Dakshineswar Kali temple, Belur Math, Museum and many other historical places of Kolkata to make their knowledge on the heritage of Bengal. She organized an exhibition of the paintings and paper crafts of her students at Sarada Devi's house. It was a unique thing to visit for local people. Many women came to visit the exhibition, and they were delighted.

Nivedita noticed lots of differences between the students of India and the students of the West. A religious nature has been seen in every Indian student. In the school, while playing, they make figures of clay and worship the figures. She noticed that the little girls were deeply impacted by social customs. They

are not conscious of their freedom and individual existence. She wanted to grow the awareness of the individual self among the girls but never tried to hurt their respect for their families. Practicing lessons of courage and freedom make a woman distinct from the crowd. Thus she presented teachings in different ways. Tamarind seeds were used to learn Arithmetic. Students picked them up, count them, and multiply them. In that way, they learn Arithmetic. Each student had to solve a particular problem of the task. They taught that not only the Vedas but all books are divine. Books are the source of knowledge. She won the hearts of her Hindu neighbours because of her gentle behaviour. Her generosity and dedication made the school popular. Nivedita noticed that girls are very enthusiastic and want to learn new things. It made her more encouraged to begin a new section for the women.

In the year 1903, she started a new section with the help of Sister Christine. Sister Christine was another great devotee who took the vow to help the underprivileged. In the new section, they taught reading, writing, sewing, painting, etc. Many mothers of the students from the children section joined to the women section. This section started at four o'clock in the afternoon when the women complete the household works and get some time. They came to the school and attended the classes with attention. Another teacher, Labnyaprabha, who was the sister of Jagadish Chandra Bose, help them in learning languages. They read Bengali and English language. Sewing class was taken by Sister Christine. The women tried to finish their household tasks as early as possible to attend the classes. They were interested to learn different subjects. Many young girls who were child widows joined the women section of Nivedita's school. She was very optimistic about them and taught them very generously. Nivedita started classes on handicrafts and vocational training to make the women self-dependent. It helps them to earn money for their families. During her teaching days in India, she entirely identifies herself with the Indian women.

Nivedita realized illiteracy is the root cause of India's misery. So, she was very concerned about education for all Indians. "Nivedita has spoken or written on different aspects of education: primary, secondary and university education; women's education; training in arts and crafts; scientific and technical education; and soon. She realised that the educational problem in India was the 'problem of problems', and to her dismay found that people generally had very little awareness of it" (Bhattacharya 2017).

She considered women as 'the mother of society and upholders of family life' (Bhattacharya 2017). Mother is a great teacher whose virtue considerably inspires the child. She believed like Swamiji that progress of Indian women prospers the whole nation. It will uplift the nation from degradation. Nivedita desired the education which gives strength to the women of India. Swamiji also visualized the nation with the strength of both men and women. Nivedita said, "He saw plainly enough that what was wanted was a race of women-educators, and this was how the contemplated making them. Strength, strength, strength was the one quality he called for, in woman as in man" (*Complete Works of Sister Nivedita 2016*).

### **Sister Nivedita's devotion to India**

Sister Nivedita was a creator of constructive education in India. She desired to make a nation based on both men and women strength. Swamiji dreamed of that powerful nation and Nivedita attempted to attain the dream. To work for Indian people, she transforms entirely. From an ideal teacher to a social reformer - the journey was not so smooth. She faces many social and religious obstacles. People of the Hindu religion earlier did not accept her as a teacher of their daughters. They did not want to send their daughter to Nivedita's school. But by the gentle behaviour, Nivedita overcomes all obstructions. She became an ideal teacher and guide of the girls of her school. She did not care about her comfort and peacefully lived in the small residence of Bagbazar. The summer was unbearable for her because she came from a temperate climate. Nivedita never disturbed by the circumstances. On a day of May, she brought her students to visit the Museum. She entirely dedicates herself in the worship of humanity. "Nivedita addressed India as 'our nation', and she referred to Indians as 'our people'" (Bhattacharya 2017). When the British Government banned the Swadeshi song, she introduces 'Vande Mataram' as the daily prayer of her school. Nivedita wanted to make a nation in the foundation of education. Education is the perfect means to grow a sturdy society.

Nivedita never forgets the importance of national unity. She taught her students to construct a unified nation through mutual collaboration. She always treated the country as a mother. So as a devotee of India, she took part in the independent movement. During the Swadeshi movement, she introduces spinning in her school and discards all foreign goods. Nivedita had a very tender and kind personality that the despotism of the British Government hurt her. She involved in the independent movement and supported many nationalists in different ways. She admits India as her mother, and the troubles of the mother unquiet her. Her altruistic quality won many great personality's hearts at that time. Rabindranath addressed her as 'Lokmata', that means the mother of all people'. She was called 'Lioness' by Swami Vivekananda. Shri Aurobindo called her 'Agnisikha', means 'flame of fire'. Indian people called her 'sister'. Nivedita always raised her voice against any unjust law of the British Government. She criticized fearlessly any order or rule of the Government against public welfare. Sister Nivedita believes that the progress of India is dependent on the political freedom of the country. She wrote in many newspapers and periodicals about the misery of the Indian people. By her writings, she wanted to unite the Indian people, who forget the actual strength of them.

### **Importance of Nivedita's position in Indian society**

Nivedita was an eminent teacher and writer. She wrote many books in her short life span. Her famous books are *Kali the Mother*, *The Master as I Saw Him*, *The Web of Indian Life*, etc. Her writings on Vivekananda now reprint in five volumes titled *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*. Whenever she heard about the misery of the people, she goes and tries to rescue them. In 1899 when plague spreads in Kolkata, she took part to help the sufferers. She also took a significant part in the great East Bengal famine in 1906. She came to India to help Swamiji in women education, but here she took parts in the independent movement of Bengal. In the development of the Indian society, her exceptional contribution is not forgettable. Her generous nature and kindness made her a prominent personality in Indian history.

### **4. Conclusion**

Sister Nivedita was a noble-hearted, compassionate, dynamic lady. She was a great devotee of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda's philosophy of life influenced her. She came to India and started walking in the footsteps of Swamiji. She realized that the suffering of Indian women ceased by education. Sister Nivedita's contribution to woman education is deeply significant. In this paper, I am discussing the exceptional contribution of Sister Nivedita to Indian society.

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