



## SISTER NIVEDITA AND INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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### Abstract

Sister Nivedita inspired Indians for national regeneration. Her purpose was to provide the Indian people the crave for self-sacrifice for their Motherland which had ostensibly existed due to their vanquished situation. She meant to compile the idea of Dharma with the national ideology in which every Indian would devote himself to India, a nation, as the sole Dharma to pursue. She firmly emphasised on the requirement of establishing national unity all over India. According to her perception, true patriotism would allow the Indians to be discernible as a strong undivided whole. Nivedita was fret about the political crisis in India resulted from British colonial rule and offered her unconditional support for the compulsory ongoing Swadeshi movement in Bengal. Though Nivedita was not an unswerving combative revolutionary but resilience of revolution was inherited in her personality and mentality. Her focal intention was to upraise the spiritual ideas of Hindu religion and to drench Indians into it, in that way the national reawakening process could take place. Nivedita's urge for the reawakening of India had been manifested from her lectures and writings on the contemporary Indian political situation.

**Keywords:** Irish Nationalism, Imperialism, Swadeshi Movement, Indian Freedom Struggle, Dharma.

### Introduction

In the late eighteenth century, British East India Company came to India with a purpose of doing business. Soon, they took over Indian administration and enjoyed the control over it. After their triumph over Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, Great Britain officially claimed their domination over India. At first, the British government wanted to educate Indians to facilitate their administrative works. But, as one of the consequences of this initiative of the government, the Western educated Indians felt the necessity of reforming Indian society according to the standard of the West. These people wanted to groom Indian society into a modern one. Raja Rammohan Roy was first Indian who realised that. Later, Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Mahadev Gobind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Lala Lajpat Roy and others were also realised the importance of regenerating India to revive its true historical position. (Atmaprana, 1985:41-42) Regenerating India required the revival of historical tradition and cultural heritage of India. Only by making common people understand the historical and cultural significance of their country Indian renaissance could take place. To spread the national consciousness, initiatives must be taken from lowest and humblest grades of the society. At this peak of national disorientation Swami Vivekananda took the mission of upliftment of Indian society. Swami Vivekananda was never a revolutionist in political sense. According to him, the essence of revolution rooted in the religious and cultural history of India. He showed a new perspective of spiritual and moral revolution through which present human condition could be changed. (DasGupta, 2013:3) Through him, Sister Nivedita shared the same perception later. However, this article intends to analyse Nivedita's political views and her contribution in Indian freedom struggle.

### Nivedita's Views on Imperialism

Nivedita belonged to a nationalist family. Her maternal grandfather, Richard Hamilton, and paternal grandfather, John Noble were the active contributors of Irish nationalism. Nivedita's father, Samuel Noble was inspired by the nationalist ideals. So, she inherited the same ideals from her bloodline. Before coming to India, Nivedita already witnessed how a nation's independence could be consumed by imperialism. Her nationalist thinking was the synthesis of the ideals of Irish Sinn Fein movement and Russian Nihilist revolution. Therefore, the negative impact of imperialism was not unknown to her.

Sister Nivedita came to India on 25 January 1898. In her stay in Bengal, under the supervision of Swami Vivekananda, her political and social thinking had got a new dimension. In the early days of her arrival in India, Nivedita was unaware of the vicious rule of British government. But, soon after realising the fierce activity of the British government against Indians, she became not only an inspirer of national resurgence in India but was also considered as a great radicalist in favour of Indian freedom struggle. The misdeeds of the British government to the Indians turned her to believe that the British government governed this country to demolish the existing intense attachment among Indians to serve Britain's own interest. She chose to play the role of serving the cause of nationality for Indians which eventually might cost her to speak against her own race. Nivedita understood the political turmoil in India and she intended to make herself useful to the cause of national regeneration in India; on the other hand, she simultaneously carried out her educational work. In a letter to Mrs. Ole Bull on 26 April 1899 she declared with all her disappointment: "I hate my own people." (Basu, 1, 1982:126) She clearly stated in favour of India's religious superiority to Western ideals. In the meantime, Nivedita came to know that she had been subjected to spying by the British police for her suspicious nationalist activities in India. Moreover, in a letter to Miss Macleod on 3 March 1902 she mentioned that the British police held the authority to open her letters. (Basu, 1, 1982:458).



### **Nivedita and Indian Freedom Fighters**

Though this action of the British government might abrogate her freedom of expression, she admitted, it could not make her silent for the long time. Despite this situation, Nivedita gave her full assistance to the revolutionary works of Okakura and others in India. Ironically, after Swamiji's demise she started to see the world from the eyes of Swamiji. She felt that after having a long tour all over India with the purpose of spreading Swamiji's ideas among Indians she had possessed enough mental strength and self-confidence to fulfil her duty to India.

However, Nivedita never disengaged herself from getting involved in the revolutionary works for Indian freedom struggle. In fact, her political thinking was blazed after the death of her *guru*, Swami Vivekananda. She unveiled the true significance of Swamiji's teaching which gave her life a purpose. She took the responsibility to make India into a native soil where every countryman, such as the poor, the illiterate, the sweeper etc., would be recognised as the siblings of the *Mother India*, irrespective of their racial or social discrimination as dreamt by Swamiji. She devoted herself to walk on the path of ideals and principles which her *guru*, Swamiji, delivered to her. Though Nivedita turned her life in accordance with the ideology of her *Master*, her method of persuasion was entirely distinct one. (Reymond, 1985:255-56)

Nivedita endeavoured to stress on the idea of *Dharma* to merge with national ideology in which every Indian would devote himself to his country as a nation, as the sole *Dharma* to pursue. In her public lectures, she encouraged the students by saying that they could make themselves useful by serving India whole-heartedly. (Reymond, 1985:255-56) During her tour in October 1902 in Baroda, Nivedita met the young aspiring revolutionist Sri Aurobindo Ghosh. Both of them weren't unacquainted with each other. To Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, Nivedita was the author of *Kali the Mother*, which was a miraculous inspiration for the India's freedom aspirers.

To Nivedita, Sri Aurobindo had already proved himself as the potential leader of youth by publishing zealous articles in the *Indu Prakash*, a popular newspaper in Bombay. In Baroda, Sri Aurobindo had engaged himself in giving training to the members of a revolutionary party for preparing them for the greater purpose of India's freedom. She proposed to him to immediately come over Bengal to continue his revolutionary work. (Reymond, 1985:269) In Bengal, Calcutta was the centre of nationalist activities and there were numerous organisations to pursue it. Regarding this, Nivedita had more or less strong association with Dawn Society, Anusilan Samity and others. She was well aware of the necessity to unite all these groups under a common leadership to coordinate their work. (Ray & Ray, 2003:220) She wanted to turn these organisations into political training centre for the students. On the occasion of giving lecture to the Hindu Boys' Association in Patna, Nivedita said: "Think that the whole country is your country and your country needs work." (Atmaprana, 1992:183)

### **Nivedita and Indian National Congress**

Nivedita's nationalist activities in India drove her to get a direct contact with the political leaders of the Indian National Congress. To her, the Congress was the representative of political life of India. In other words, it seemed to her as the voice of India. Many political leaders sought Sister Nivedita's counsel in pursuing their important plans. She had the friendly association with the Extremist leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal and others, and also with the Moderate leaders like R.C. Dutt, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and others. Though she was not a member of any political party but her contribution in influencing the political whereabouts of the National Congress could not be surpassed. (Reymond, 1985:286) Nivedita stated that national movement must be corresponded by the educated youth of India. In the meanwhile, she also observed that political representation of Indian National Congress was partial by nature. However, it was a successful organisation of Indians not in terms of its discussions or its resolutions had higher degree public appeal. Rather it had an exceptional approach in pursuing political resolutions. In a single appeal it could combine the whole country altogether. It signified national prosperity in its activities. To conduct national movement, she advised Congress as: "...the real task of the Congress is that of an educational body, educating its own members in that new mode of thinking and feeling which constitutes a sense of nationality; educating them in the habit of prompt and united action, of political trustiness, of communal open-eyedness; educating itself, finally, in the knowledge of a mutual sympathy that embraces every member of the vast household which dwells between the Himalayas and Cape Comorin between Manipur and the Arabian Sea." (Nivedita, 1948:191)

Nivedita consciously stated against the division of Congress into moderate and extremist sections. There should be one national party of India. The division between moderate and extremist was purely based on difference of perception. However, she asserted that this division in Congress might have a positive aspect too. Both of these sections of Congress were dedicated to the cause of Indian nationalism. In one hand, both sections, moderate and extremist, would accelerate the process of nationalisation with double effort. On the other hand, both of them widened the area of functioning of nationalist party by pursuing different methods. (The Modern Review, February, 1908:191) She tried to inspire the Congress leaders of both sections to overlook their difference of opinions and look forward to the cause of national struggle. (The Modern Review, February, 1908:192)



### **Nivedita's Views on Indian Political Situation**

According to Nivedita, a patriot could truly feel the misery, exploitation and plight of his countrymen. (Reymond, 1985:286) Her judgement on national education was deeply disappointed by an initiative taken by the British government. The news was widespread that the University Bill 1902 approved by Lord Curzon tried to limit the numbers of Hindu students in the University. The outburst of the people against this news was overwhelming. Nivedita, too, criticised this selfishness of the government and identified the educational problem of India as 'the problem of problems.' (Atmaprana, 1985:32) Nivedita drove her all attention to get India rid of these prejudiced British policies and continued her fight against these anti-Indian policies of Lord Curzon. She deeply emphasised on the concept of united India. On 26 February, 1904, in Calcutta Town Hall, she proclaimed before the audience as: "...the problem of India is a religious one; but there will never be a solution unless the truth is grasped that the goal is to be sought in the great word, *Nationality*." (Reymond, 1985:301)

### **Nivedita and Swadeshi Movement**

In 1905, Lord Curzon undertook the policy of divide and rule, the obvious corollary of which was the announcement of the 'Partition of Bengal' on 20 July 1905. It came into effect from 16 October 1905. The people of Bengal burst out in protest against this intolerable policy of the British government and they were united themselves under a common banner of national sentiment called Swadeshi Movement. Nivedita was worried about the political crisis prevailing in India resulted from British colonial rule and offered her unconditional support for the contemporary ongoing Swadeshi movement in Bengal. This movement insisted Indians to boycott the foreign goods with an intention to encourage the indigenous industries which led to incur the rage of the British government for non-cooperating with them. Soon this movement encouraged every Indian to live an independent life by repudiating the alien cultural influences. In March 1905, Nivedita wrote in the *Indian Review*: "This swadeshi movement is an integral part of the National Righteousness." (Reymond, 1985:313)

According to Nivedita, Swadeshi movement had proved that Indian people uphold a strong history in which they behold the ideals of *Dharma* against any outside lure or excitement. (CWSN, 4, 2012:277) During the Swadeshi movement Nivedita always courageously stood by its leaders risking of all the dangerous consequences that might result because of this action. In a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Ratcliffe on 16 August 1911, Nivedita wrote: "The Swadeshi movement is, in a political sense, crushed; but this plan showed that it *cannot* be crushed... I feel sure...that it will never die – but must live and grow." (Basu, 2, 1982:1220)

In fact, Nivedita clearly agitated against the brutality of the British government in her various writings. In other words, her urge for the reawakening of India had been manifested from her lectures and writings. Her reaction against the British Government's declaration of Partition of Bengal in 1905 was reflected in her speech at Darjeeling where she firmly stated as: "But we shall continue the struggle until the sacrifice and heroism of the children of India compel the English to remove - the insulting barrier which divides Bengal, until they treat us with respect!" (Reymond, 1985:320) In spite of all these efforts, the proposal of Partition of Bengal became a law on 16 October. Nivedita announced that day as the 'National Day' in her diary. (Atmaprana, 1992:191)

Meanwhile, the British police became apprehensive of the move of Nivedita. According to the report prepared by C. A. Tegart, Special Superintendent of Police, Intelligence Branch, dated 22 April 1915, (Basu, 1382BS:272) Nivedita's writings were to some extent political leaflet in masquerade. It considered her activities in Bengal as highly treasonable activities which could not be overlooked. Though Nivedita was not an unswerving combative revolutionary but spirit of revolution was inherited in her personality and mentality. Her focal intention was to upraise the spiritual ideas of Hindu religion and to drench Indians into it, in that way the national reawakening process could take place. Sister Nivedita was involved in several activities such as socio-cultural as well as political ones. There was no doubt that Nivedita had a radical revolutionist mind. But there was not enough evidence of her involvement in revolutionary work. However, Nivedita never disregarded her main objective to change the mind of Indians.

For nation-building it was essential to identify the basic ground of unity on which sentiment for nationality would depend. Nivedita told Indians to uphold the truth of their *Dharma* and worship their Motherland, by which they could triumph over any adverse situation. (CWSN, 4, 2012:288) To realise absolute freedom, individual must perceive the idea of nationalism. Only through his struggle for freedom from foreign rule would lead him towards true realisation of renunciation or *Mukti*. In other words, nationalism was based on common love for birth-land and every individual in it had a common duty to serve his nation.

### **Conclusion**

In one word, Nivedita was a multi-faceted personality which was felt in every moment of her work in India. Her political outlook was mostly radical in nature. She clearly agitated against the brutality of the British government in her various



writings. In other words, Nivedita's urge for the reawakening of India had been manifested from her lectures and writings on the contemporary Indian political situation. In the course of dwelling on India's national renaissance the role and contribution of Sister Nivedita cannot be surpassed. Her prominently interpretation of nationality in the Indian context had enormous contribution in the history of Indian political struggle.

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