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SISTER NIVEDITA'S CONTRIBUTION FOR INTERNATIONAL INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING & WOMEN'S EDUCATION

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Introduction

"The future will always unite her name of initiation Sister Nivedita to that of her beloved Master...as St Clara to that of St Francis, although of a truth the imperious Swami was far from possessing the meekness of the Poverello and submitted those who gave themselves to him, to heart-searching tests before he accepted them. But her love was so deep; Nivedita did not keep in her memory his harshness – only his sweetness."
- Romain Rolland

The above quote from Romain Rolland highlights St. Clara and Sister Nivedita's subjectivity as a religious woman within the larger global patriarchal structure of the religious monastic orders (both Christian and Hindu). But, how should we read Sister Nivedita's story in the 21st Century as feminist academics passionate about equal rights of human beings, irrespective of gender differences?

Growing up in postcolonial Calcutta (now Kolkata), we all know the familiar story of the Scottish-Irish social worker, author, teacher and a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita aka Margaret Elizabeth Noble (28 October 1867 – 13 October 1911). But, should we remain caught up in a sense of religiosity that reinforces such gender hierarchies? Or, should we move beyond religiosity and mysticism to read Sister Nivedita's story from a spiritual humanist perspective? How do we respond to Reba Som's analysis quoting from Rolland in her recently published book, Margot (2017)?

Perhaps Nivedita had for Vivekananda a "lover's adoration", similar to what Madeleine Slade was to have for Gandhi, but the age difference between Gandhi and Slade was thirty years as against the five years between Vivekananda and Nivedita. Rolland concluded that although "the sentiment of Nivedita had always been one of absolute purity maybe Vivekananda understood the danger".

The above quote from Som's book reveals the vulnerable human side of two illustrious public figures of the twentieth century- religious and political. However, I would argue here that; we need to move beyond such relational approach of reading Sister Nivedita only with respect to her relationship with Swami Vivekananda.

I would read "Margot" aka Sister Nivedita as an exceptional individual, whose contribution for international intercultural understanding and women's education has still not been fully appreciated by the global patriarchal structure of this world. In this short essay, I seek to highlight some of her individual achievements underplayed for long by those who write (his)story and often write about notable women, such as Sister Nivedita, as part of that (his)story undermining (her)story. However, I argue here that, Sister Nivedita's unspoken and underplayed contribution was huge within the colonial Indian context to establish international intercultural understanding and for women's education.

International Intercultural Understanding

Nivedita played a crucial role in inspiring Indian artists to rediscover the roots of their own artistic traditions at a time when their practice was largely informed by the traditions of the West. Her efforts, along with those of E.B. Havell (Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta) and Abanindranath Tagore, led to the flourishing of what came to be known as the **Bengal School of Art**. A new generation of young painters grew, and some of the best-known today, like Nandalal Bose, were particularly inspired by her. Nivedita was at the forefront of the movement attacking the then prevalent Western claim that Hellenic art had inspired Indian art, and that there were no real Indian artistic traditions before that.

Her love of the Indian people and deep understanding of India's rich history and society was admirable. It is evident from this editorial, which she wrote for the "KARMAYOGIN" journal, which she edited from February 1910 after Sri Aurobindo's departure to Chandernagore following his arrest warrant by the British colonial government:

"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."

Sister Nivedita openly expressed solidarity with the Indian freedom fighters and supported them in many ways by taking great risks herself as an expatriate Scottish-Irish woman in British India. It is to be noted here that, Ireland was also fighting for its freedom from England. Hence, as a religious woman of Scottish-Irish heritage, her identification with fellow Indians fighting against colonial oppression was genuinely strong, irrespective racial divide, which heightened during colonial times. She informed Sri Aurobindo about the British Government's plan to deport him and took charge to be the editor of the revolutionary journal launched by Sri Aurobindo- "Karmayogin", which was later banned by the British Government.

The Patron

Not just Indian artists, Nivedita also acted as a great patron for Indian scientist, Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose. Rabindranath Tagore once said that, "in the day of his success, Jagadish gained an invaluable energiser and helper in Sister Nivedita, and in any record of his life's work her name must be given a place of honour." From organising financial support to editing his manuscripts, Sister Nivedita made sure the pioneering Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose was able to continue with and share his work fighting against colonial oppression and racism.

Nivedita was also a great champion of the Tata Institute, which would later become the Indian Institute of Science, in Bengaluru. She wrote about it extensively in the Indian, as well as English press, meeting high officials and rallying the support of some of the world's best minds when the British government, under Lord Curzon, scuttled J.N. Tata's proposal of founding a research institute of science and humanities in India. Today, the *Indian Institute of Science (IIS)* in Bengaluru is the only research intensive University from India, which comes up in the global rankings of top research Universities around the world ahead of the IITs and IIMs.

However, there is little critical reflection on the role that early Indian Philanthropists, such as J.N. Tata played to further Indian science within the colonial Indian context. There is also little acknowledgement and reflection on the role that, brave expatriate social workers, such as Sister Nivedita played to help establish a research institute of science and humanities in India. The establishment of IIS was a major landmark for modern Indian higher education at that time, since the best research-oriented minds would go abroad to do research, while the rest would be part of a colonial model of higher education focused on teaching and testing to recruit civil servants for colonial governance and for various professions, such as medicine, engineering and law. (Jayaram, 2007)

Women's Education

Compared to her contribution for the nationalist freedom movement, Indian higher education, art and science; Nivedita's contribution for women's education is more well-known, if not among all Indians, at least within the Bengali society. This is because she built a school for girls in the same area where she started her modest life in Calcutta at a rented house in Baghbazar area since 1898. Based on her conversations with Swami Vivekananda, who wanted her to lead efforts to enhance women's education in India, she wrote, "it has taken for granted from the first, that at the earliest opportunity, I would open a girls' school in Calcutta". (*The Master as I Saw Him*, 1910, as cited from Nivedita 1967).

On November, 13th, 1898 she opened the girls' school at 16, Bose Para Lane, Baghbazar, Calcutta. Swami Vivekananda and other monks of Ramakrishna Math visited it on the first day. Sri Sri Sarada Devi, the holy consort of Sri Ramakrishna came and performed the opening ceremony. As an expatriate foreign lady, Nivedita was extremely conscious of the cultural differences and did not want to impose her ideas about education on the girls coming from middle-class Bengali families. As a trained teacher back in her home country, she adopted the method of discovering first what the needs of the local society were and what the girls themselves wanted to do. In order to design a model of modern education for Indian women, she adopted a culturally syncretic model to help initiate Bengali girls into formal schooling outside their home.

I had to learn what was wanted, to determine where I myself stood, to explore the very world of which my effort were to become a part. The one thing that I knew was that an educational effort must begin at the stand point of the learner, and help (her) to development in (her) own way. But I had no definite plan or expectation, save to make some educational discovery which would be qualitatively true and universally applicable to the work of the modern education of Indian women". (*The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol-I 1967)

Conclusion: The "Humanitarian Karmayogini"

Margaret Elizabeth Noble walked a long way from Europe to become "Sister Nivedita" (the offered one, as renamed by Vivekananda) and "Lok Mata" (the people's mother, as referred by Tagore) through her commitment towards humanitarian social work to uplift the status of the Indian people within the colonial Indian context. Nivedita's work for international intercultural education and women's education was, therefore, part of her larger humanitarian "karmayoga" in India. She took great risks to support the Indian freedom fighters and, to further the cause of Indian art and science flourish within the colonial Indian context. She also put her own life in significant peril on

several occasions of great calamity, such as during the plague outbreak in Calcutta in 1899 and the great East Bengal famine of 1906 to serve the sick and dying people. After her stint in the famine-struck countryside of East Bengal, she contracted a severe form of malaria; it took her months to recover. The malaria impaired her health, eventually leading to her premature death.

Today, as we a global village with scientific and technological advancements, our world still torn into narrow boundaries race, nationality, gender etc. It is high times for us to mediate quietly and reflect on the legacy of this remarkable human being and her contributions for international intercultural understanding and women's education to learn humanitarian lessons from her. This is the bestway we can show our respect to this remarkable "Humanitarian Karmayogini" on her 150th Birth anniversary.

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