

A Lesser Known Pioneer in Women Education:Sister Nivedita

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Abstract: *Of the many disciples of Swami Vivekananda, there were a few from outside India who became very renowned and did some phenomenal work in the spiritual upliftment and education of the women. Margaret Elizabeth Noble from Ireland who was christened as Sister Nivedita was one such famous devotee and disciple of Swami Vivekananda and that too during his times. She was the first Western woman to be accepted into an Indian order of monks. Swami Vivekananda's principles and preaching's marked an impression on her mind and heart and this brought about a significant change in the way she lived her life. He was a great visionary of India and his thoughts were based on 'look forward' visions. To improve the plight of women under the British rule, she was chosen for the role of educating Indian women. The present paper attempts to show Sister Nivedita's contribution in educating the women and the rich legacy of service she left behind us was born out of spiritual peace. At present views of Sister Nivedita is a matter of immense relevance when gender disparities still persists in India and lot more needs to be sufficed in the field of women's education in India.*

Keywords: *Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda, Upliftment, Women Education etc.*

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Introduction

The greatness of any civilization could be assessed by the regard and respect shown by its men folk to the women of that society. The status of women in India has been subject to many upheavals over the past few millennia. The position of women in any society is the index of the standards of its social organization. The standard of a society rises and falls in correlation with the rise and fall in the status of women. Society is a web of social relationships of which those between male and female are the most intimate and stable.

In modern India, women have graced high offices in India including that of the President, Prime minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition.

Women Education in India

The position of women in ancient India was vital. They used to take important decisions and were also allowed to choose their own husbands through the ancient system of “Swayamvara.”

The deterioration of status of woman started from the period of Smritis (800 B.C. – 200 A.D.) particularly with Manu and his Manu Smriti, which was considered to be ancient Hindu code. Manu pronounced that “no woman was entitled to freedom.” Woman was treated as Abala, a weak helpless and powerless being utterly incapable of managing and preserving the family status.

The Indian woman’s position in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period. Sati, child marriages and ban on widow remarriages became part of social life in India. The advent of Muslim conquest in the Indian sub-continent brought the Purdah practice in the Indian society.

During the British rule there was an attempt to revive women’s education in India. During this period, various social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule etc. fought tirelessly for the upliftment of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s dire efforts led to the abolition of the Satidaha Pratha in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s crusade for the improvement in condition of widows led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.

It was realized by reformers from Ram Mohan Roy onwards that one of the major cause responsible for India’s domination by the West was the condition of women. The efforts of the reformers were focused on improving woman’s inferior position in the society. Apart from stress on women’s education and removal of social mal practices intellectuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others gave a call for reform of laws so as to improve the legal status of women.

But it was Swami Vivekananda, the great visionary and philanthropist, defended the marginalization of women and empowering women and made the poor a priority of

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Ramkrishna Mission. Women must be put in a position, so that they could solve their problems in their own way (Mandal, 2015). Swamiji realized that his dream of making the women strong, fearless and conscious of their charity and dignity could be materialized by his western disciple, Sister Nivedita. She became the first western woman to become a Brahmacharini who is a pioneer in educating the women of India.

Objective of the Study

To study the historical perspective which has contributed to the concept of modern comprehensive education.

Birth and Early life of Sister Nivedita

Margaret Elizabeth Noble was born on 28th October 1867 in the small town of Dungannon in North Ireland. Her father, Samuel Richmond Noble, was a priest, and her mother's name was Mary Esabel Noble. She lost her father at the age of ten and was brought up by her maternal grandfather Hamilton. Hamilton was acclaimed as one of the first – ranking leaders of the freedom movement of Ireland.

Margaret was highly inspired by her father and forefathers on the one hand and the ideals of her maternal grandfather on the other played a pivotal role in shaping her character, religious sentiments and love for the motherland.

Nivedita's meeting with Swami Vivekananda

She was a religious seeker, whose search for the eternal truth led her away from the strict dogmas of Christianity. Her quest for truth led her to meet Swami Vivekananda in 1895 where he was explaining Vedanta philosophy in the drawing room of an aristocratic family in London. Margaret was immensely pleased by the majestic personage of Swamiji. She attended several other lectures of Swami Vivekananda. She raised lot of questions whose answers clarified her doubts and established faith and respect for the speaker. Vivekananda's principles and preaching's influenced her a lot and this brought about a remarkable change in her. Seeing the fire and passion in her, Swami Vivekananda could foresee her future role in India and urged her to come to India and work relentlessly for the Indian women.

Swami Vivekananda was extremely moved by the misery of the poor people of India under the colonial rule and he opined that education was the remedy for all evils engulfing

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the contemporary Indian society, especially that of the fate of Indian women. Margaret was picked up for the role of educating Indian women.

She came to Calcutta on 28 January 1898, was initiated into Brahmacharya (a celibate yogic order) and was christened with the name 'Nivedita' given by Vivekananda on 25 March. Within a few days of her arrival in India, on 17 March 1898, Margaret met Sarada Devi, wife and spiritual consort of Ramakrishna, who, surpassing all language and cultural barriers, embraced her as 'khooki' or 'little girl' in Bengali.

Girls's School in Bagbazar

Nivedita had an intention to open a school for girls who were deprived of even basic education. Sister Nivedita established Ramkrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls' School at Bagbazar, Kolkata in November 1898. The school was inaugurated by Sarada Devi, in the presence of Swami Vivekananda and some of the other disciples of Ramakrishna.

Nivedita went from door to door to educate girls, many of whom were in lamentable condition owing to the socio-economic conditions prevailing in early 20th century India. In many cases she had to face refusal from the male members of the girl's family. Nivedita had widows and adult women as her students. She taught them sewing, basic rules of hygiene, nursing, etc., apart from regular courses. She imbibed among the female students of her school the deeper nationalistic sentiments by singing the *Bande Mataram* Song. Collecting financial aid for the school was a difficult task. To meet the daily expenses for the school Sister Nivedita had to earn money from her writings and delivering lectures. She took active part in philanthropic activities. She worked tirelessly to improve the lives of Indian women irrespective of casteism.

Rendered service during plague epidemic

During the outbreak of plague epidemic in Calcutta in 1899 Nivedita nursed and took care of the patients, cleaned dirt from the area, and inspired and motivated many young blood to render voluntary service to the affected area. She appealed for help in the English newspapers and requested for financial support for her plague relief activities. She also organised everyday activities, supervised the work and personally handed over the written instructions for the preventive measures to be adopted by moving around the victims.

Contribution towards nationalistic sentiments of India

Nivedita was a gifted orator and writer and travelled extensively across India to deliver lectures, especially on India's culture and religion. She made an appeal to the Indian youth to

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work selflessly for the sake of their motherland along the ideals of Swami Vivekananda. In the beginning Nivedita, like contemporary intellectuals from Europe, was quite optimistic about the colonial rule in India and believed that it was really possible for India and England to love each other. However, in the period of her stay, she came to witness the barbaric side of the British rule, the repression and oppression and the division between the ruling elite and the ruled plebeians; she finally inferred that it was necessary for India to gain independence to prosper further. Therefore, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to the cause of opposing the British rule. After Swami's death, she, being acutely aware of the inconvenience of the newly formed Ramakrishna Mission on account of her political activities, publicly dissociated herself from it. However, till her last days she had very cordial relationship with the brother disciples of Swami Vivekananda like Swami Brahmananda, Baburam Maharaj (Swami Premananda) and Swami Saradananda, who extended her support in her charitable and education activities in every possible manner; she was very close to the holy mother, Sarada Devi.

Concept of Women Education and its relevance in the Modern Era

Sister Nivedita had a very clear and concrete concept of education of women. She emphasized the feeling of belonging and pride to the country and nation. It is because this objective of education can be fulfilled only when it descends from the mother to the child. She insisted on cultivating love of people and country that love had to be conscious and not merely latent.

In modern concept of education we have noticed a segregation element between the educated and the common countrymen. To counter it the concept of National Service Scheme (N.S.S.) has been introduced.

As a means to the end of national consciousness and pride Nivedita advocated study of reading, writing elemental mathematics along with History, Geography and Science. According to her that would develop a world sense, a time sense and a feeling for the fact. Geography, History, Science and Hygiene would bring the awareness of the educand to a level of the awareness of the world around. The basic study of 3R's is only a means to the end of attaining the end of consciousness. Knowledge of the basics will enable women to go through books, newspapers and magazines that carry the thought of the world around. Sister Nivedita insisted on the basic indianness in education for Indian women. Knowledge is without bound but for its effectiveness it needs to take into account the regional necessities and regional needs. She clearly said that the aim of education for Indian women should not be in making her a French Woman or an English one. An Indian girl must not be an ornament of English or French society. To educate her that way is a crime.

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In recent years we have the shortcomings of colonial education drawn up in the time of European Education system. In the first place we find educated people who have lost command over their mother tongue and have not mastered the other language.

An educated individual must be able to realize his or her position as an atom in the community and also must realize the community as an atom in humanity. This awareness of individual vis a vis the universe is the ultimate in all true education.

Women's education is important because Sister Nivedita believed that the will of the mother flows through each individual. The truly educated one should be lamp from whose radiance the learners would light up. Sister Nivedita divided ideal education in three stages:

- a. Studies of childhood
- b. Travel
- c. Selection of the chosen task

Education is not a part time occupation. There is no point at which education ends. Only recently we believe in continuous education and have felt the necessity of Continuous Evaluation (Formative Assessment and Summative Assessment). In travel the adequate knowledge of one's own country should come first. Objects observed during travel should be understood not only as a view of strange people and strange lands. Purposeless travel breeds meaningless love of change. It is most important to prepare one's daughters to understand their country. Travel can lead us to the realization of ourselves being a part of the community of the country. This feeling should be spontaneous and sincere not a matter of display. Referring to Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa Deb equating Gold and Earth. Sister Nivedita says that "India is all, I am nothing! I am nothing! India is all." In that way we can learn to throw away self, life and ease for the sake of national righteousness. It is the duty of the mother. On the firm faith man and the child can fight their battles.

Nivedita's concept of education contains in it which we have realized and are realizing a hundred years after. If education is liberation, Sister Nivedita conceived of it in the true sense. In her concept of education the individual is important only as part of the community and the community as the part of the nation. There has not been a better idea of universalisation of individual through education. Basics of this educational idea are equally important for both men and women but education of women is more important. Because mother is the lamp whose radiance lights up the child is the will of the mother runs through the child.

Sister Nivedita's idea of education comprised of theoretical instruction and practical demonstration. She was having her demonstrations in the laboratory of life. There is the story that when the children had thrown packages of their fruit, tiffins around. Sister Nivedita herself collected and cleaned the room. Setting example before them. If we had learnt from teachers like Sister Nivedita we would have known Swachh Bharat a century earlier.

Conclusion

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Sister Nivedita envisioned a society with a new type of human being with whom scientific standards, geographical conceptions, historical pre- possessions will be harmoniously blended and she proposed the woman's minds to manifest them, as deeply and as powerfully as men's. Women should be competent enough to consider problems involving these, as men. Unless and until women are united with men in the journey of life, that journey must forever remain crippled and barren, unproductive of spiritual growth. Humanity is only complete in the two-fold organ, the feminine mind united with the masculine and neither alone.

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