



WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF SISTER NIVEDITA

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ABSTRACT :

Sister Nivedita, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda showed her love for India through her speeches and memorable writings. She realised that India's unrivalled, integrating culture that had spread from the Himalayas in the North to Kanyakumari in the South was due to this closeness with the ancient epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, a closeness that had been attacked and almost severed by the colonial system of education. These two great works form together the outstanding educational agencies of Indian life. All over the country in



every province, especially during the winter session, audiences of Hindus and Mohammedans gather round the Brahmin story teller at night fall, and listen to his rendering of the ancient tales. In her fourteen years of Indian life she dedicated her for the cause of the Indian Culture and heritage. She delivered a number of speeches on Hinduism and wrote a number of books on the prosperity and glory of India.

KEYWORDS : Sister Nivedita, Vivekananda, Tagore, India, Hindus.

INTRODUCTION :

Margaret Elizabeth Nohe [1867-1911] was an Irish teacher, author, social activist school founder and disciple of Swami Vivekananda.¹ She met Swami Vivekananda in 1895 in London and travelled to Calcutta, India in 1898. Swami Vivekananda gave her the name, Nivedita (meaning "Dedicated to God") when he initiated her into the vow of Brahmacharya on 25th March 1898. She worked in India with the ideal of service to mankind which she considered as the true service of God. She died on 13th October 1911 at Darjeeling. Her epitaph reads, "Here lies sister Nivedita who gave her all to India. Sister Nivedita-who taught us to respect our own tradition, heritage and culture."²

Sister Nivedita arrived in Calcutta on 28th January 1898, and till her passing away on the 13th October 1911-all these fourteen years, she gave herself completely to the service of India. Her guru Swami Vivekananda had blessed her saying, "Be thou to India's future son, the mistress, servant and friend in one". During the fourteen years of her stay in India she lived upto his expectations, fulfilling them to the highest degree. Through her utterances and writings, she served her adopted country in more than one way. No son or daughter of the country loved India more than Sister Nivedita.

Though her life was short, it was a very fruitful one. She lived in the historic age of India's national revival. She had made a deep study of Indian literature, art, history mythology and philosophy and along with these, she also possessed an all comprehensive mind, a deep insight, an intense love for the common people and a broadness of mind and heart. All these helped her to interpret in an extraordinary and unique way the history of India, Indian art, literature, customs and traditions which touched the hearts of all. Their appeal appeared in her writings and speeches so deep and impressive

that it roused the people and filled them with great inspiration. Thus she helped to build up Modern India.

Sister Nivedita came to India primarily to spread education among the women. She directed her efforts first to the establishment of a school for girls at Baghbazar in North Calcutta which was opened on 13th November 1898 by Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Among the problems she had to encounter was the intransigence of Indian families, which frowned upon educating a female child. Sister Nivedita had to go aboard for collecting funds. She had to study a lot of Indian philosophical and religious literature to be worthy of becoming a nun of the Ramakrishna Order. There were long trips she had to undertake within India. That was only the beginning. With the school as the centre of activities, She expanded her work. She came into contact with the women and the people of the neighbourhood. Her love and sympathetic understanding gradually won the hearts of the children as well as the confidence of their parents.

Swami Vivekananda had invited Nivedita to come and work for the women of India. It was therefore natural that she thought deeply on the ideals of Indian women, their problems, their position in society and their education. After a deep study she could say, "She (India) is above all others, the land of great women. Wherever we turn, whether to history or literature, we are met on every hand by those figures, whose strength she mothered and recognized, while she keeps their memory eternally sacred."³

Sister Nivedita's success lay in the method she adopted to bring education to Indian masses, she used the time tested habit of storytelling, which was a great force in educating Indians. She would relate the subject to historical details about India. In this manner she instilled in her students a reverence and pride for their own traditions. The school prospered and soon became an icon for women's emancipation. Her studies for this approach resulted in a couple of classics from her pen: Footfalls of Indian History and Cradle tales of Hinduism.⁴

In one of her speeches at Madras in 1902 she said, 'when we come to the charge that Indian women are ignorant, we meet with a far deeper fallacy. They are ignorant in the modern form, that is to say, few can write, and not very many can read. Are they then illiterate? If so, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and the Puranas and stories every mother and every grand mother tells to the babies, are not literature.'⁵

This is why she would never call Indian women as ever having been illiterate. They had imbibed the best in the Indian tradition and strove to bring up their children as a Rama or Krishna, Arjuna or Kama, Sita or Savitri.

Sister Nivedita gave so much importance to the education of Indian women because she knew that it was they who were the custodians of the culture and civilization of their country. She felt very sad to see that education which the women of India received at colleges and universities was neither national nor creative. It only induced them to imitate the western civilization and give up their ideals of life and culture.

She rightly said that education which taught reading and writing only was no education. The women who did not learn to understand national history, the woman who had no notion of what her country was like, was not truly and properly educated. She believed that education in India had to be not only national but also nation-making. By national education she meant that education which had a strong colour of its own, being rooted in the culture and tradition of the home and the country.

Sister Nivedita wrote, 'A national education is, first and foremost, an education in the national idealism. . . the aim of education is emancipation of sympathy and intellect. This not often reached by foreign methods.'⁶

She lived and mixed with the Indian women so closely that she had a first hand knowledge of them. So she could interpret their life and ideals more correctly. She believed that a synthetic development of mind and heart was most essential in the case of women because in them lay the synthesis of life.

The most important part of Sister Nivedita's work in India was her endeavour to rouse national feelings among Indians-creating an Indian, nation Sister Nivedita took her first lessons of Indian history and culture from her master Swami Vivekananda. Actually it was Swami Vivekananda who dedicated

her to the feet of Mother India. Through his inspiration she first learnt to love this country and gradually India became her everything. It entered into her very soul.

In her book, *'Footfalls of Indian History'*, She wrote about the glorious past of Indian history and concluded, 'India, alone of all the nations of antiquity, is still young, still growing, still keeping a firm hold upon her past, still reverently striving to weave her future.'⁷ In her book, *'Aggressive Hinduism'*, she wrote "we must create a history of Indian living terms. . . . the history of India has yet to be written for the first time. It has to be humanized, emotionalized, made the trumpet-voice and evangel of the races that inhabit India. . . . There is no evangel without worship. Throw yourselves, children of India, into the worship of these and your whole past. Strive passionately for knowledge. India's whole hope lies in a deeper research, a more rigid investigation of facts".⁸

Sister Nivedita's 'nation making' or 'nationality' became the keynote of all her thinking, writing and speaking. "The whole task now is to give the word nationality to India, in all its breadth and meaning. The rest will do itself. India must be obsessed by this great conception. . . It means new views of history, of customs, and it means the assimilation of the whole Ramakrishna-Vivekananda idea in religion, the synthesis of all religious ideas. It means final understanding of the fact that the political process and the economic disaster are only side issues-that the one essential fact is realization of its own nationality by the Nation."⁹

Associations like the Young Men's Hindu Union Committee, the Gita society, the Dawn society and the Vivekananda society did a lot of spade work to rouse the cultural and national feelings among the people. Sister Nivedita associated herself very actively with all these societies and went and spoke on various subject of national interest. She coined the word "national consciousness" and opened out new horizons for the youth of the country. She encouraged the young people to arrange sports, recitation and lecture competitions on special occasions and awarded prizes for merit. The young men always clustered around her for inspiration and guidance.

Sister Nivedita went from village to village and touched the heart of the people. Whenever she addressed the people in India and discussed their problems, she always used words like 'our people', 'our problems'. Rabindranath Tagore has rightly remarked that the tone of absolute kinship which struck in her voice was not heard or felt when any Indian uttered these words. Tagore therefore remarked "We-while giving perhaps our time, our money, even our life - have not been able to give them our heart; we have not acquired the power to know the people as absolute real and near. . . she was in fact a Mother of the people".¹⁰

To rouse the national consciousness among the people and to make them aware of their national unity and heritage, Sister Nivedita resolved to travel to different parts of India and talk to the people personally. First she went to Bombay where she gave three lectures at the Gaiety Theatre. The subjects were (1) Swami Vivekananda (2) The Unity of Asia, and (3) Hindu Mind in Modern Science. Her thoughtful, suggestive as well as inspiring lecture was lightly appreciated by the audience and attracted a considerable amount of public attention.

The visit to Bombay of an English lady who had become a thorough Hindu and who lectured on the sublimity of Hindu religion created quite a sensation and naturally inspired an eager curiosity especially among women. In a lecture delivered at Hindu Ladies Social Club, she described how she came to the Hindu religion, and also commented on her guru Swami Vivekananda. In the end she appealed to the ladies to study the grand literature of their own country in preference to the literature of the west and to cling to the simplicity and sobriety of their domestic lives.

The last lecture in Bombay was about "Indian Woman hood" and Sister Nivedita discussed in a most interesting way the differences in the manners and customs of the people of the west and of the East. She spoke of the moral genius in the personal character of the Asiatic Woman. The intellectual presentation of her lectures, expressed the depth of her devotion and faith which had induced her to come from her country and to lead a life of asceticism in a strange land.

From Bombay Sister Nivedita went to Nagpur and lectured mostly to the students. She visited many schools and spoke to the students about Swami Vivekananda's ideals for the youth. The students received Swami Vivekananda's message with great enthusiasm. On her way back she visited Wardha,

Baroda and other places. Her next trip was to South India and she gave stirring lectures in Madras and due to her ill-health, she had to go back to Calcutta. Later she went to Patna, Lucknow and many other places of North India and gave innumerable lectures.

Everything that was connected with India was very sacred and holy for Sister Nivedita. Rabindranath Tagore in his introduction to her book, "The Web of Indian Life," he had remarked that she lived our life and came to know us by becoming one of ourselves. She became so intimately familiar with our people that she had the rare opportunity of observing us unawares. . . And Sister Nivedita has uttered the vital truths about Indian life.¹¹

Thus Sister Nivedita went all round the country inspiring the people and in this way she could rouse the spirit of national consciousness among them, making them conscious of their culture, tradition and national heritage.

Next, Sister Nivedita understood that for the total rejuvenation of India a revival of Indian art was the most essential, but this must be a revival of Indian art and not a slavish imitation of Western painting. She wrote in her book "Aggressive Hinduism", Art must be reborn; not the miserable travesty of would-be Europeanism that we at present know. There is no voice like that of art to reach the people. . . And art will be reborn, for she has found a new subject-India herself."¹²

Sister Nivedita believed that the rebirth of art was essential to the remaking of the nation. Her appreciation of the Indian art and her passion for its revival were mainly derived from Swami Vivekananda. It was during her travels in northern India with Swami Vivekananda in 1899 that she understood the spiritual import of Indian Fine Arts. At that time everyone believed in Greek influence of Indian art, architecture, literature and culture. Swami Vivekananda gave a brilliant exposition on India art in the Paris conference of 1900 where he proved that the views of the Western Orientalists on these subjects were shallow and biased. Nivedita also became convinced of Swami Vivekananda's views and later became one of the chief critics of the theory of the Hellenic influence on Indian Art.

Sister Nivedita brought about a rebirth of Indian art and due to her efforts Indians began to realize the greatness of their own art and the need for its revival. In her essay "The Function of Art in shaping Nationality" she says ". . . art offers us the opportunity of a great common speech, and its rebirth is essential to the upbuilding of the mother land".

If Indian art has been able to occupy today such an important place and command great respect in the world, it is entirely due to the efforts of these four-Sister Nivedita, Havell, Commaras Swamy and Okakura. They together did a lot to prove that Indian art was completely free from Greek Influence. Sister Nivedita occupies a special place as she alone knew the philosophical background of Indian art.

Sister Nivedita believed that Indian painting must bring some revelation of noble thoughts. She wrote in her book, *Civic and National Ideals* thus : "An Indian painting, if it is to be really Indian and really great, must appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way, must convey some feeling or idea that is either familiar or immediately comprehensible; and must further, to be of the very highest mark, arouse in the spectators certain sense of a revelation for which he is the nobler."¹³

Sister Nivedita took a deep interest in the work of the younger group of artists and encouraged them much. She attended the art exhibitions organized by these artists and wrote reports on them in the leading newspapers. Indeed for the revival of Indian art Sister Nivedita strived so much that it would not be an exaggeration to say that her name will ever shine in the history of the revival of the ancient Indian art of Ajanta, and the Rajput and Mughal styles. She was not an artist but a great connoisseur of art, and her inspiration, encouragement and guidance helped in many ways not only to revive ancient Indian art, but also to develop other fields of Indian art.

Nivedita became known to a much wide circle of people through her books. The most important of her books is "The Master as I Saw Him" which was acclaimed as a master piece in the literary world. The two articles of Nivedita, 'Lambs Among Wolves' and 'Aggressive Hinduism', which were later published in book form, were meant to counteract the half-truths and untruths about Indian social life spread in the West by Christian Missionaries for their selfish ends. The defiant and aggressive note of the articles speak of Nivedita's authority, knowledge and conviction. These two articles with 'The Web of Indian life' and 'Studies from an Eastern Home' attracted the much attention as being systematic

attempts to reveal the inner life of India. The sweetness of the Hindu way of life and the Wide survey of women as they live and think in different parts of India reveal to many Indians themselves the wealth of interest and romance that, lies hidden in their homes. The intense sympathy, kindness and love of Sister Nivedita for India animate every sentence in these books. Specially her book *The Web of Indian Life* created a sensation in the Western World. His '*Civic and National Ideals*' is a collection work of short essays on civics, nationality, art and other topics. Her '*Hints on National education in India*' contains stimulating essays on national education, practical educational projects and educational needs of women and children. The foot falls of Indian History contains some historical essays of Sister Nivedita.

All these works of Nivedita, indeed, formed an illumined literature' which made India's possessions and heritage appear with a new radiance. They instilled a sense of pride in the minds of the readers. Nivedita possessed an all-consuming love for India and in one of her lectures in Bombay, she said 'I love India as the birth place of the highest and best of all religions; as the country that has the grandest mountains, the Himalayas. . . the country where the homes are simple; where domestic happiness is most to be found; where the woman unselfishly, unobtrusively, ungrudgingly, serves the dear ones from early morn to dewy eve. . . and in the unselfishness raises womanhood to its highest eminence.¹⁴

To conclude, during her fourteen years of stay in India, Nivedita lived upto Swami Vivekananda's expectations. She worked incessantly to make India strengthened and equipped to stand before the world as a glorious country.

END NOTES

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