

# Women Empowerment in Bengal and Sister Nivedita: A Sesquicentennial Accolade

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**Abstract:** *The present paper proposes to concentrate on Nivedita's contribution to the evolution of the status of women in West Bengal. On the eve of her sesquicentennial birth anniversary celebration throughout India, this paper aims at refreshing the memory of the people in India about the assiduous task Nivedita had initiated and performed for the betterment of the subjugated women and girl children of West Bengal in particular, as she was invited by Vivekananda to come to Kolkata for the cause of women who had to continue to live in an inferior status without proper education. The present study mainly upholds how Nivedita toiled much to empower women in Bengal through educating them and teaching them to become self-sufficient.*

**Key Words:** *Women, education, empowerment, patriarchy, womanhood, etc.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

"England has sent us another gift in Miss Margaret Noble."—Vivekananda

It would be no overstatement to articulate that women in India, especially in Bengal, have forever been subjected to subordination and have all the time been treated as substandard to man in civil liberties and opportunities. The subjugated status of women of the-then Bengal may be well summed up in accordance with the fundamental rules for women, expressed in *Laws of Manu*, written early in the Christian era. The duties of women as set by Manu are as follows:

By a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house.

In childhood a female must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent...

Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife...

She who controlling her thoughts, words, and deeds, never slights her lord, resides (after death) with her husband (in heaven), and is called a virtuous (wife).<sup>1</sup>

So, the position of woman in India, especially in West Bengal, was very much cocooned and cornered. The status of woman, as envisaged by Manu, was no doubt low. Her duty was mainly confined to worshipping her husband as god (Patidevata) and she enjoyed no liberty to go beyond the four walls of her husband's house. In a nutshell, the role of woman as a daughter, wife and mother was thoroughly dependent on the dominating male.

## 2. DISCUSSION:

Evidently, so far as the Indian social context is concerned, the women in general still retain the needful patience and nerve to maintain stability in family. In other words, the equilibrium in an Indian family mainly rests on the submissive nature of woman who always pays respect to the physical and psychological demands of man. Victor S. D'Souza's observation in "The Changing World View and the American Family" is highly pertinent here:

One may therefore say that unity and integrity of the joint family are maintained through the subordination of woman by man. In fact, according to the traditional Hindu code, woman is always deemed to be subordinate to man, first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her son. (32)

It will be no exaggeration to say that the Indian women in majority are accustomed to such subjugated condition of life. They do not mind cooking rice or baking bread and serving it to their husbands and children. They spend their whole life as good daughters, wives and mothers. They never mind remaining confined within the four quarters of their families. From this perspective, the so-called subjugation of woman, as the feminists would like to call it, is a willing phenomenon.

But the concept of womanhood has changed in recent times. A woman particularly when she is educated seeks emancipation from the dehumanizing structure of patriarchal society. And the person who has contributed much to kick off the process of empowering women through educating them is none but Sister Nivedita.

But to my utter surprise and bafflement, a reputed book seller adjacent to a college (I would better not name the vendor) curtly replied that there was no book on Sister Nivedita in his bookshop when I asked him for a book on the same. After that, when I visited the college library and asked for a book by or on Sister Nivedita, one of the

employees replied in negative to further render myself not only dumbfounded but irritated as well. This is how my quest for Sister Nivedita began, when I was asked by the organizing secretary of a national seminar on Sister Nivedita to pen a few words on Nivedita on the eve of her sesquicentennial birth anniversary celebration.

However, subsequently I dialed my better half to immediately send me a book I already owned so that I may write something with proper citation on a dedicated being who ‘denied everything to herself for the benefit of the people among whom she lived and worked’ and who ‘gave her all to India and therein lies her true dignity’, observed Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>2</sup>

Truly, nothing can be more ironic than the fact that ‘the saintly, self-sacrificing woman who threw away the pleasures of a life of ease to serve the poor and downtrodden people of India, giving lessons to the girl students of her school at Baghbazar or nursing with the radiance of her goodness the plague-stricken dying boy on her lap’ (1942), as Moni Bagchi recounts the story of Sister Nivedita, and whose ‘love for India was genuine’ as Tagore found it<sup>3</sup>, is not even able to occupy a meager space either in the book-shelf of a college library or in book-shop of a vendor.

### 3. ANALYSIS:

However, an Irish by birth and a Hindu by conversion, Margaret Elizabeth Noble travelled to Kolkata in 1998 when Vivekananda wanted that under her love and care, the women of India, particularly in Kolkata, be looked after to get better upon their health and education. Vivekananda believed that the overall development of a race or country is not possible without the education of women because women as mother play a significant role in the learning process of children. If a mother is not educated, how would it be possible for her to provide at least elementary education to her children. In fact, during Vivekananda’s time in India, especially in Bengal, women had almost no freedom in society; they were compelled to keep themselves confined within the four walls and had to lead a life of tripartite subjugation as laid down by scriptural text—woman as girl child under her father, woman as wife under her husband, and woman as mother under her son.

Vivekananda believed that the quest of women for liberation would not begin without their cognitive empowerment. And education is at the basis of cognitive empowerment. Hence, he wanted Nivedita to support him, who before his meeting with Vivekananda in 1895 in London had already actively taught in a secondary school with the ideas of Swiss educational reformer Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and German pedagogue Froebel (1782-1852) who laid the foundation for modern education based on the recognition that children have exceptional needs and potentialities. The method of education proposed and introduced by Froebel namely ‘Kindergarten’ influenced Nivedita and she applied the same method after she inaugurated a school for girls in Baghbazar area of Kolkata on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 1898 with an aspiration in mind to provide education to the girl children. Her commitment was so much for this cause that she did not hesitate to visit the houses to encourage and inspire the girls to join her school. Sister Nivedita effortlessly toiled to educate her students with the spirit of nationalism as well. Hence, she introduced ‘Vande Mātaram’ in her school as prayer. Her school suffered from financial crunch. Hence, Nivedita with the help of her friends in England and America formed ‘Ramkrishna Guild of Help in America’ in 1900 to provide financial support to her school. She wrote, published and sent her ‘Project of Ramkrishna School for Girls’ to Mr. and Mrs. Legget who abundantly helped Nivedita run her school.

At the Hindu Ladies Social Club in Bombay in 1902, Nivedita was asked to reflect on “The Virtues of Indian Womanhood”. She replied, “...I feel it would be presumption on my part to speak to you on the subject because Indian womanhood is better understood and practiced by each and everyone of you than me”<sup>4</sup>. This is but too humble an attitude of Nivedita; she had rather a positive idea on Indian womanhood which she developed because she ‘lived our life and came to know us by becoming one of ourselves’, Tagore opined<sup>5</sup>. On Indian mother and womanhood, Nivedita wrote:

As mother, an Indian woman is supreme. The honour that a man does here by the simple word ‘my wife’, he does better there by saying ‘the mother of my children’. Sons worship their mother as the ideal. Motherhood is the ideal relation to the world. Let us free ourselves from self-seeking as the mother does. Let us be incapable of jealousy as is a mother to her child. Let us give to the utter most.... Let us be indiscriminating in our service. Such is the Indian woman’s conception of a perfect life. Such is the moral culture with which she surrounds her children”. (*The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*<sup>6</sup>)

Nivedita, like the Indian categorizers, also believed that the integrity in an Indian family is occasioned by the submissive role of women. Nevertheless, she inspired the women to empower themselves through an amalgamation of the old and new values of life. She urged them to read the oriental literature with a view to adhere to one’s own cultural tradition. Yet, they must keep open the windows to modernity, affirmed Nivedita.

### 4. FINDINGS:

As a woman Nivedita realized and experienced the sad predicament of women in male-dominated society. She observed the subjugation of women by men; she witnessed that women in Bengal had to bear all the responsibilities inferior to those of men. While men are supposed to enjoy rights, women are confined within the four walls of the

dwelling house to carry out the domestic responsibilities. She was aware of the terrible fact that the patriarchal codes of conduct have placed man in a privileged position of “Subject” and the woman in the position of an “Object”. A woman exists only in relation to man. Nivedita’s chief aim also was undoubtedly directed against the passivity of women who continue to accept servility as their destiny. At this point, we are reminded of Simon de Beauvoir observation in Part IV (“The Formative Years”), Chapter 1 (“Childhood”) of *The Second Sex*:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (295).

Beauvoir considers that passivity is an essential characteristic feature of women; and this passivity is not determined biologically, rather socially. Beauvoir continues to write:

Thus passivity that is the essential characteristic of the ‘feminine’ woman is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned; it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by her teachers and society (307).

Nivedita, long before Beauvoir wrote the quoted statements in her book, had evidently this felling of Beauvoir. Like Beauvoir, Nivedita came to realize that the ‘passivity’ of a woman is ‘imposed upon her by her teachers and society’. By ‘society’, Beauvoir certainly hints at the patriarchal society. But Nivedita was not such teacher, as mentioned by Beauvoir. Rather, she had been a teacher who played an affirmative role in lifting the women from their passive role and position. At the same time, what Nivedita felt more than Beauvoir is that the ‘passivity’ of a woman is also occasioned by her illiteracy. Without being educated, the women will never have the cognition to liberate and empower themselves from their subordinated status. Hence, education, Nivedita felt, is a must for the cognitive empowerment of a woman, leading ultimately to the overall improvement of her status in a patriarchal society.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

Swamiji died in 1902. Though it was a stumbling block to Nivedita’s mission for empowering women through education, nothing curbed her spirit. In 1903, with the help of Sister Christine (Christina Greenstidel, 1866 –1930) she started a separate section for women in her school with a view to stop the child marriage of Indian girls. Afterwards it came to be known as ‘Pura Stree Bibhaga’ where women were allowed for the first time in Bengal to attend the School to empower themselves through learning the art of sewing, needlework and arithmetic, whenever they were free from domestic responsibilities. All these arts, Nivedita aptly grasped, would help the women to be economically empowered, leading ultimately to their cognitive liberation as well.

Hence, Sister Nivedita was herself an institution; her selfless contribution for the cause of women in general and for the Bengal women in particular can never be minimized. Through educating and instructing the Bengal women to become self-sufficient, she set a ladder for the women of Bengal by means of which they have been climbing up the rungs of empowerment at their best.

## End Notes:

1. These quoted words are by Susan Wadley in the essay entitled “Women and Hindu Tradition”, ed. Rehana Ghadially *Women in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988) p.30.
2. These words of Tagore about Nivedita are quoted by Moni Bagchi in the article entitled ‘Sister Nivedita: A Centennial Tribute’, published by *Economic and Political Weekly*. An informed reader may access the full article of Bagchi in <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24478849>.
3. Ibid.
4. Editor’s Preface to *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol. II. Uttarakhand: AdvaitaAshrama, 2016. Web. The book was originally pulished in print form in 1967.
5. Quoted by Moni Bagchi in the article as noted in No.2 of “End Notes”.
6. I have consulted the E-book version (2016) of *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol. II., published by AdvaitaAshrama, Uttarakhand; as no page number is marked in uploaded e-book version available in Google E-books, the citation in my paper is without referring to the specific page number.

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