



PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SISTER NIVEDITA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL IDEAS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Margaret Elizabeth Noble aka Sister Nivedita, a close associate of Swami Vivekananda, was born and brought in abroad but dedicated herself towards the upliftment of deprived people of India. Her thought and actions were meandered through western as well as eastern ambience. Hence in all her efforts - be it religious preaching, narrating sculpture of places of antiquity in India, or advocating for women's education - impression of a unique fusion of western and Indian wisdom was quite evident. The objective of this study is to analyse the sources of western and Indian influences which shaped Nivedita's mind and work.

Keywords: Socialization, Swami Vivekananda, Nationalism, Religion, Education

Introduction

Every individual's life is generally influenced by the familial, social, and political environment in which he or she lives. Thus, Sister Nivedita's [1867–1911], whose original name was Margaret Elizabeth Noble, life and works were influenced by various factors, which led to her transformation from Margaret Elizabeth Noble of Ireland to Sister Nivedita of India. Her contributions to the socio-religious field of modern India were fascinating. To understand the circumstances behind the transformation of Sister Nivedita, the present study seeks to investigate the various influences that shaped her thoughts and activities in her transformation and work process. In fact, the process of shaping and reshaping the human character is referred in the etymology of social science discipline as the process of socialization. It is a process that shapes and modifies behavioural pattern of individual since very tender age in accordance with the socio-cultural and political milieu that one lives in. Certainly personality and behaviour of an individual demonstrates the way one has been socialised. There are a number of agencies, such as family, friends, educational institutions, peer groups, religion, media, and political parties and so on and so forth, which inculcate such attributes that become inseparable from an individual. However, sometimes the agencies that play fundamental role in the process of socialization may appear complementary as well as contradictory to each other. Hence, given the formative influence of the process of socialization on one's thought, expression and vision, it would be pertinent to initiate an enquiry on the thought and ideas of Sister Nivedita by taking into account the way she had been socialised or her ideas regarding various socio-political phenomena were developed. (Basu, 2015, pp.71-75) Therefore, Margaret's ideas of truth, religious thinking, spirit of service, patriotism, attraction towards politics, and others were explicitly inherited from her family members. Apart from family heritage, there were other formative influences like local circumstances and experiences, which played vital roles in Margaret's transformation, such as the schools where she studied and where she taught as a teacher, and also the intellectual persons with whom she came in contact during her stay in London. Her socio-political orientation found a new direction when she met Swami Vivekananda in London in November of 1895. All these formative influences make up her thought process, which is plausibly reflected in her later works on India.

Formative Influences: Family Heritage

Margaret inherited religious ideas from her family. Miss Noble imbibed her family heritage of serving God and the urge for the country's freedom from her family. Later, this attribute led her to engross the spirit of Indian cultural heritage. Margaret Elizabeth Noble, popularly known as Sister Nivedita, was born in Dungannon, County Tyrone, in North Ireland, on October 28, 1867. The Noble family originally belonged to Scotland, but they moved to Ireland in the fourteenth century. Being an Irish woman, Margaret was brought up in a western educational culture and was habituated to a western lifestyle like any other English woman. The European intellectual atmosphere left an indelible impact on her mind. (Mukherjee, 1997, p.1) In the nineteenth century,

Margaret's grandfather, John Noble, a minister of the Wesleyan Church in North Ireland, played a legendary role in Ireland's freedom struggle. In spite of being a Protestant, John Noble did not hesitate to take the side of Roman Catholics in protest against the British suppression and stood against the pro-English Church of Ireland for the sake of his country's freedom. John Noble undertook the task of engrossing the Irishmen with the spirit of nationalism. He expressed his rage against the British tyranny in his own way. He persistently carried out his tasks of serving God on the one hand and his struggling country on the other. After his death in 1845, his wife, Margaret Elizabeth Nealus, kept her husband's nationalist idealism safe in her heart and delivered its essence to her granddaughter, Margaret. Margaret's father, Samuel Noble, was stimulated by the same ideal of serving God and Ireland's freedom. He was also a Congressional minister and an Irish nationalist. Like his father, Samuel Noble also dreamt of leading men to God and setting Ireland free. (Remond, 1985, pp.9-10) Margaret stayed with her grandmother till the age of four and learned from her the lessons of Bible. The first *Bible* of her life was presented by her grandmother. (Mukherjee, 1997, p.2) Margaret was enormously influenced by her grandmother so much so that she addressed herself in some of her stories as 'Elizabeth Nealus'. (Ray & Ray, 2003, p.13)

Like her paternal grandfather, John Noble, Margaret's maternal grandfather, Mr. Richard Hamilton also influenced Margaret to become a dedicated soul towards Irish nationalism. Hamilton sacrificed his whole life for the cause of Home Rule movement and to set Ireland free. He was the chief leader of *Young Ireland*,¹ which was established to spread the ideas of Irish nationalism. He demanded a fair land distribution among farmers. He was imprisoned several times for the land reform movement. He sowed the seeds of love and freedom in the mind of Margaret. He inspired Margaret to read the books on lives of the Irish patriots and the tales of great revolutionists. (Mukherjee, 1997, p.17) Nivedita's idea of nation was shaped largely by her maternal grandfather, Mr. Hamilton, and paternal grandmother, Mrs. Noble, which she often mentioned later; 'The first teachers to show me what a nation was were my grandmother and grandfather.' (Cited in Reymond, 1985, p.19)

Secondary Influences: Socio-Political Ambience in West

Apart from family lineage, there were other formative influences that played vital roles in Margaret's transformation. This phase of her life could be mentioned from the beginning of her student life until the day she met Swami Vivekananda in London in November, 1895. Her acquaintance with Swamiji transformed her socio-political outlook to a large extent. In her student life, Margaret was fond of the headmistress of the school, Miss Collins. She provided Margaret with proper guidance and helped her perceive the knowledge of the spiritual world. Being inspired by Miss Collins, Margaret studied the *Bible* passionately to find out the reasons behind the creation of the universe, but she preferred the books on science for the fulfilment of her curiosity. In 1891, she started to work as teacher in Wimbeldon. She wanted to implement the pre-school educational comparative method, which was discovered by the Swiss educational reformer Pestalozzi and the German educator Froebel.² She emphasised on applying this methodology through constructive activities in the pre-school education of children. (Reymond, 1985, pp.17-25)

Margaret was an ardent supporter of the Home Rule movement, and after coming to London, she joined the 'Free Ireland' group, which was an Irish revolutionary organization. (Reymond, 1985, p.28) Margaret was very much influenced by the ideologies of Charles Stewart Parnell, Prince Peter Kropotkin, and others. Margaret met Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), a Russian revolutionary, at the 'Free Ireland' platform. He propounded the idea of an anarchist movement. In his experience, as he stated, every country's survival should be determined by its own terms and conditions, not imposed by any superficial authority. Kropotkin always asserted that, 'Revolution must be brought about from within a country; it did not come from the blue.' (cited in Chakraborty, 1975, p.4) He wrote the famous book titled '*Mutual Aid*,' in which he believed in cooperation rather than conflict for the evolution of human civilization. He propagated his anarchist ideals through writing articles, periodicals and books. Margaret was also engaged with his method of propagating this cause. He acknowledged the role of violence in the freedom struggle of a country. His anti-state anarchist views implanted radical ideals in her. The impact of the concept of Kropotkin's '*Mutual Aid*' was reflected later in Margaret's writings on social issues. In her writings, Margaret also acknowledged the influence and contribution of Kropotkin's ideas on her life and mind. She was enthused by Kropotkin's remark that 'Revolution is only a period of accelerated evolution.' (cited in Mukherjee, 1997, p.19) Another eminent personality, Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891), an Irish nationalist as well as a politician and a leader of the struggle for the Home Rule for Ireland. He was elected chairman of the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain in 1877, and he remained chairman of the Irish Party in the House of Commons for the next twelve years. He established self-government in Ireland. He demanded that Ireland should have its own executive and legislative control over all relevant matters. When Margaret participated in the Home Rule movement, Parnell had already established himself as the pioneer of the nationalist movement in Ireland. He played an inspiring role in Margaret's transformation. Margaret was very fond of him and moved by his nationalist ideology. During this period, she learnt the techniques of armed revolution. But, after the death of Parnell, the Irish Party was dismantled, and the constitutional movement moved from Ireland to Britain, and its focus was shifted from nationalism to liberalism. In 1892, Margaret spoke openly in support of the Home Rule Bill for Ireland. Nonetheless, Auguste Comte's (1798-1857), philosophical doctrines also motivated Margaret. He propounded the doctrine of positivism. He developed his positivist philosophy in order to resolve the social maladies of French Revolution. He coined the term 'Altruism'. According to Comte, knowledge was based on observable facts. In his view, human society could be studied by the scientific method. Margaret was influenced by Comte's sociological and philosophical views. His use of scientific views for understanding human society was explicitly appreciated by Margaret in her writings. According to her,

... man, today stands longing for catholic reality, yet unable to find his message in dogmas by reason of his passion for, and faculty of judging of, the truth. The scientific movement has done that. It has given us a power of discrimination and tremendous passion for truth. (Mukherjee, 1997, p.7)

Comte believed in scientific truth as the most authentic truth. Furthermore, Margaret also acknowledged the contributions of Darwin, T. H. Huxley, Tyndall, Spencer, and others in her writings, which had a huge impact on her mind. She was very much influenced by Aurther Griffith's Sinn Fein movement. Sinn Fein meant 'ourselves alone', which implied taking resort to 'self-help' in achieving Irish freedom. Margaret later recognised the 'self-help' idea as an economic and political doctrine. (Mukherjee, 1997, p.7-20)

These theoretical and practical experiences of her life led her to explore the reality of the world. In short, membership in the 'Free Ireland' group, involvement in the Home Rule movement, inspiration from the Russian Revolution stimulated and influenced Margaret's mind. It was true that she was nurtured in Irish nationalism all through her life but she never involved in politics. Her main concern was self-expression of suppressed people for national consciousness. On the other hand, her curiosity to reveal the truth of the spiritual world dominated her mind throughout these years. Later, she became a member of Sesame Club in London, which became a platform for regular discussion not only about arts and literature but also about politics, ethics, and others. Many eminent personalities in arts and literature, like George Bernard Shaw, T. H. Huxley, and renowned scientists visited this place. Margaret's lectures on 'The Psychology of the Child' and 'The Rights of Women' were critically acclaimed in this club. (Reymond, 1985, p.28) Therefore, in her early life in England, Nivedita learnt to contextualise the socio-cultural and political framework to understand universal phenomena in socio-religious term which was reflected in her later work in India.

Swami Vivekananda: Philosopher and Guide

Margaret had established herself as a renowned teacher and writer at a very young age. In spite of these engagements and popularity, she was not satisfied with her continuous search for eternal truth. She did not accept the reality or existence of anything without having sufficient proof. In the early stages of her life, Margaret was an ardent devotee of Christianity. But soon she was disillusioned with it. At the age of eighteen, she found inconsistency in the preaching of Christianity while seeking the truth regarding the origin of the universe. So, she became sceptical about the Christian religion and found natural science more consistent than Christianity in search for truth of the universe. At this juncture, she got a biography of Goutam Buddha. Margaret was convinced that Buddha's propagated idea of salvation was much more consistent than the preaching of Christianity. After meeting Swamiji, a doorway of spiritual relief was unravelled before her. (Ghosh, 2001, p.67)

In November 1895, Margaret was invited to attend a lecture on religion by Swami Vivekananda at West End in London. She described this first meeting with Swami Vivekananda in her subsequent writings, particularly in *The Master As I Saw Him*, which is a living account of her feelings about Swamiji and his impact on her mind, his teachings, his ideas and preaching, her patriotic feelings so on and so forth. He interpreted the Vedanta philosophy and the *Gita* into English. Margaret was acquainted with the new religion, Hinduism, from Swamiji's lecture. As enshrined in Christianity, he told, love was also regarded as a powerful resource of human strength. Apart from mind and body, he emphasized on the existence of the *self* as the driving force of the body and mind. Swamiji emphasised on the word 'realisation' rather than 'faith'. He interpreted that achieving 'Renunciation' was the sole endeavour of all religions. He emphasized on freedom of soul, whereas in the West, the priority was laid on the service to humanity. He said that all religions were equally true as they were the expressions of a universal oneness in their distinctive ways. Swamiji believed that soul of an individual happened to be a part of eternal self. Only through the paths of *Jnana, Bhakti, and Karma, that is, knowledge, devotion and work*, a human soul could perceive the knowledge of God. (CWSN, vol.1, 2012, pp.18-20) At the first meeting, Margaret was overwhelmed by Swamiji's preaching. On the other hand, in his urge to reform Indian society, Swamiji wanted to educate Indian women for the sake of the overall regeneration of the country. For this reason, he had been searching for a noble soul who would carry forward his mission with unconditional dedication. While in conversation with Margaret, Swamiji was assured enough about the spiritual and moral strength of this foreign lady regarding the fulfilment of his mission to India. He asked her to assist him in his effort to educate the women of India. On January 25, 1898, Margaret came to India. Swamiji's *Kali worship* inspired her to write the book *Kali, the Mother*. He introduced the idea of *Kali* to Nivedita as the destroyer of evil. Moreover, Swamiji provided her with the idea of selfless love and service. (Basu, Vol.2, 1982, p.819) Fascinated by this religious interpretation of her Master, Nivedita considered religion as best possible way of expressing the soul.

On March 17, 1898, Nivedita got an opportunity to stay with Sarada Ma, the widow of Sri Ramakrishna, for a few days before she shifted to her new home at Bag Bazar with the purpose of opening a girls' school. The *Holy Mother's* company gave Nivedita the meaning of worship and severity. In this period of her life, Nivedita got the opportunity to be acquainted with Indian womanhood. With her inquisitive and analytical mind, she experienced Hindu socio-religious culture. She recognised Hindu womanhood as the combination of love, compassion and tolerance in a society which deliberately let them to be considered as the inspiration of Indian sense of renunciation. (Basu, Vol.1, 1982, p.10) On the day of the inauguration of the school, Swamiji advised Nivedita, 'Let yourself be guided. Learn everything from your pupils.' To him, 'Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.' (Vivekananda, 2016, pp.54-55) Later, Nivedita understood that national level consciousness was the basic requirement of education in India. After realising it, she completely dedicated herself to the mission of national

reawakening by spreading national education. She focused on the requirement of self-realisation among Indian students about their country's past glory. After the demise of Swamiji, Nivedita became his messenger for the socio-political life of India.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it was true that Nivedita's idea of religion was a reflection of Swamiji's ideas, but it did not mean that her interpretation of religion did not have any distinctive dimension. Her religious thinking started from where Swamiji left and soon acquired its own unique identity in the world of religious interpretations. Swamiji recognised religion as a means to achieve his man-making philosophy, whereas Nivedita stood one step ahead of her Master and considered it a means to achieve nation-making ideals. Moreover, Swamiji emphasised on realising the ultimate oneness through renunciation, which would inspire a man to do selfless service. On the other hand, according to Nivedita, the ideas of 'oneness' and 'many' were the two faces of the same coin because they varied depending on the observation of mind in different times and situations. (CWSN, Vol.1,2012, p.9) Her transformation from Margaret Elizabeth Noble of the West into Sister Nivedita of the East was very intensely described in her books, *The Master As I Saw Him* and *Notes of Some Wonderings with the Swami Vivekananda*. She was, on one hand, an Irish nationalist, social activist, great educator in the West, on the other hand, an interpreter of India's national history, arts, religion, journalist, and radical nationalist as well. Moreover, to illustrate the various formative influences that played major roles in the transformation of Sister Nivedita's mind and life, it is difficult to relocate them in any specific area of discussion, though there is enough evidence in favour of these influential factors as documented in Nivedita's letters and writings.

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Endnotes

¹ *Young Ireland* was a socio-political and cultural movement of mid-nineteenth century. It was associated with Daniel O'Connell's Repeat Association and published a weekly clandestine paper, *The Nation*, but soon it separated itself from the association and founded the Irish Confederation in 1847. The ideals of *Young Ireland* provided inspiration for Irish Nationalism. However, due to differences of opinion from within, it turned into failed initiative.

² Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and German educator Froebel (1782-1852) were two eminent educational leaders in the nineteenth century. Pestalozzi believed that the method of education would follow the natural development of child and that learning could proceed through the senses. His idea focussed on fulfilling the social and emotional requirements of child through education. Froebel's ideas contributed to the development of kindergarten school practice. He pursued the method of teaching through play and was surrounded by child's area of interest. He emphasised action-based education.

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