EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH THE ACTION AND WORKS OF SISTER NIVEDITA

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ABSTRACT

Sister Nivedita, a Scot-Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda, social worker, author, teacher, was born as Margaret Elizabeth Noble in 1867 in Ireland. She met Swami Vivekananda in 1895 in London and came down to Kolkata in 1898. Swami Vivekananda gave her the name Nivedita when he initiated her into the vow of Brahmacharya on 25 March 1898. It was her ‘rebirth’ as she often said, and to make her new name meaningful, she devoted whole of her life in the service of humanity in general and upliftment of women in particular. Very little attention have been paid little attention towards the ocean of her writings which are largely marked by her incessant endeavors for the enlightenment and upliftment of women. Most of her works, which include collection of essays, short stories and memoirs, abound in her deep concern for the upliftment and empowerment of women and yet we, the Indians hardly take note of her services; both social and literary. Therefore, in this study, the researcher has found it necessary to furnish a select list of her major works; many of which were published by the British and American publishers. The present paper discusses about the writings of Sister Nivedita to emancipate women.

Keywords: Sister Nivedita, emancipation, enlightenment, upliftment, women

INTRODUCTION

Sister Nivedita, a Scot-Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda, social worker, author, teacher, was born as Margaret Elizabeth Noble in 1867 in Ireland. She met Swami Vivekananda in 1895 in London and came down to Kolkata in 1898. Swami Vivekananda gave her the name Nivedita when he initiated her into the vow of Brahmacharya on 25 March 1898. It was her ‘rebirth’ as she often said, and to make her new name meaningful, she devoted whole of her life in the service of humanity in general and upliftment of women in particular. She rendered her painstaking services by extensive and practical social work and by the ocean of the creative writings that inspired the intellectuals globally. I have chosen this topic mainly on three counts.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study are as follows

1. Sister Nivedita’s role as a Karma Yogini
2. Sister Nivedita’s role in educating girls in the 19th century
3. Sister Nivedita’s role as a Social worker
4. Empowering Women through the writings of Sister Nivedita
SISTER NIVEDITA'S ROLE AS A KARMA YOGINI

Very few are aware of the fact that Sister Nivedita also inspired youths as the editor of Karma Yogin, the nationalist newspaper founded by Sri Aurobindo. Based on the bulk of her works and actions that speak amply for what an enlightened woman is all about, the study contends that she was for the women’s enlightenment rather than feminism. A true Missionary of the newly established Ramakrishna Mission, she had dedicated her whole life for the cause of humanity, more specifically for the upliftment of the down-trodden woman. Apart from being the first ever true woman missionary in India, Sister Nivedita was a prolific writer and mesmerizing orator who extensively toured India to deliver lectures, especially on social awareness and India's culture. She appealed to the Indian youth to work selflessly for the cause of the motherland and humanity along the ideals of Swami Vivekananda. In all her works, she has reflected her deepest concerns for the pathetic conditions of the mankind, particularly women, in the 1890s. She showed the way out not by precepts but practice.

A great humanitarian, Sister Nivedita intensively took part in the scores of altruistic activities for the upliftment of women, until she breathed her last in 1911.

SISTER NIVEDITA’S ROLE IN EDUCATING GIRLS OF THE 19TH CENTURY

For the enlightenment of the women, she worked hard for the promotion of the social services, arts, spirituality, Indian history, culture and science among the women and took extreme pains to improve the lives of the Indian women, irrespective of class or creed. To this end, she started a school for exclusively for girls and women who were deprived of even basic education in Kolkata in November 1898. In India, Sister Nivedita studied Indian culture, served the Indian people and embraced the Hindu religion. She served the Indian people with devotion and tried her best to ameliorate the plight of Indian people. The school founded by Sister Nivedita “ Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls' School”, Kolkata founded in the year 1902 is unique in its own way. It is the only educational institution for girls which was inaugurated by Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, in the presence of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda and others on 13th November, 1898. Though the School had to be closed after a few months for financial reasons, it was reopened in February 1902 permanently. She improved women’s education, especially Hindu widows whose lives turned disgraceful. She spent many years working in her small school for women in the poorest suburbs of Calcutta. Nivedita went from home to home in educate girls, many of whom were in pitiable condition owing to the socio-economic condition of early 20th century India. In many cases she encountered refusal from the male members of the girl's family. Nivedita had widows and adult women among her students. She taught sewing, elementary rules of hygiene, nursing, etc., in her school apart from regular courses. Collecting money for the school was not an easy task. She had to earn money from her writings and giving lectures and later she spent all to meet the expenses of the school. She took part in altruistic activities. She worked to improve the lives of Indian women of all castes.

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH THE WRITINGS OF SISTER NIVEDITA

All her activities encircled almost all fields of human life; culture, arts, education, science, spirituality, literature and scores of others. Because of her intense participation in all these fields of humanity, it was obvious that her actions and experiences were translated into her creative writings. It is observed in this study how she projected her concern for the enlightenment of women in her books.

Very little attention has been paid little attention towards the ocean of her writings which are largely marked by her incessant endeavor for the enlightenment and upliftment of women. Most of her works, which include collection of essays, short stories and memoirs, abound in her deep concern for the upliftment and empowerment of women and yet we, the Indians hardly take note of her services; both social and literary. Therefore, in this study, the researcher has found it necessary to furnish a select list of her major works; many of which were published by the British and American publishers.

2. Cradle Tales of Hinduism. Longmans., 1907.
3. Hints on National Education in India.
7. The Master as I Saw Him
13. Civic and national ideals, Udbodhan Office. 1929.

Some of her works is discussed in brief below

Studies from an Eastern Home are a set of essays by Sister Nivedita, published posthumously in 1913. In this book, she gives a rare ground-level vista of Hinduism from a woman's point of view in the 19th century. Pervading her writing is an earnest quest for spiritual liberation and sincere love for the Indian people of all castes. In this book, she nullifies the dogma that the way to salvation is open only for specific class of human being and asserts that all humans are equal because the same divinity pervades in all alike, irrespective of class or creed.

In The Web of Indian Life, Sister Nivedita seeks to rectify many dogmatic myths about Indian culture and customs that were prevalent in the Western world. In this book, she dwells upon the dignity of man, highlighting the significant role of women.

In The Cradle Tales of Hinduism Sister Nivedita retells the stories from Puranas, Ramayana and Mahabharata and drawing parallels form the characters like Kunti, Draupadi and Savitri, she attempts to highlight the role of women in developing the man into a superman.

In this study the researcher have chosen to speak at some length on Select Essays of Sister Nivedita precisely because it is a landmark work in which, Sister Nivedita talks at length on variety of issues concerning human life. As the manuscripts of this book went to the press when she was counting her days and it was published soon after her death, this book is considered to be the essence of her thoughts. Though the focal point of this book is the causes of the human predicament, it questions and negates the imperialistic attitude and dominance of the West in order to subjugate the millions of Indians and upholds the supremacy of humanity only against all other considerations.

The longest essay in her landmark work is The Present Position of Woman in which she out rightly rejects the Western notion of the classification of women and asserts: “Perhaps the only true classification is based on ideals, and if so, we might divide human society, in so far as woman is concerned, into communities dominated by the civic, and communities dominated by the family, ideal.” Commending the significant role the Indian women have played in past, she writes that the civic evolution of woman as a process, always takes place most rapidly in those communities and at those epochs when political or industrial transformation, or both, are most energetic and individuating and proudly concludes her argument thus; “In India, also, women have held power, from time to time, as rulers and administrators, often with memorable success.” In the same book, in the essay Revival or Reform, Sister Nivedita talks about the orthodoxies of cults and religions across the globe and stresses the need to cast away the insular sectarian dogmas in the larger interest of humanity. Though a
Christian by birth and breeding, she has no hesitation in blaming the Christians for spreading insular dogmas.

Similarly, in what books to Read, she advises the Indian youths to start with the Ramayana and the Mahabharat before switching over to Homer and Virgil and other Western classics. She feels that knowledge of the cultural heritage of one’s own land is imperative for the progress of the society.

Preferring character to intellectual accomplishment in the essay The Future Education of the Indian Woman, she writes: “An education of the brain that uprooted humility and took away tenderness would be no true education at all. These virtues may find different forms of expression in mediaeval and modern civilizations, but they are necessary in both. All education worth having must first devote itself to the developing and consolidating of character, and only secondarily concern itself with intellectual accomplishment.”

For an all-round development of the Indian woman, who could effectively take on the challenges of the twentieth century, she envisages the need for ‘a form of education that might attain this end of developing the faculties of soul and mind in harmony with one another’ and insists that woman must be taught science, history and geography because from these subjects the mind envisages ideas. The essay clearly outlines her vision of the enlightened Indian woman. It may be recalled that the school she started only for girls in 1898 had earned a name and fame in a very short period and it was frequently visited by Rabindranath Tagore and Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it need to be said the one sincerely feels the need to look back but with all dignity and dig out the treasure of Sister Nivedita’s actions for the emancipation of women since it has been lying ‘un-mined’ in her works for over a century. Sister Nivedita’s contribution to Indian society is immense. In a dark age, when women were exploited, had no access to education, married while still were in innocent childhood, she as light with indomitable courage and integrity tried to uplift not with western views but with an Indian outlook. For Sister Nivedita, the goddess Kali became both a symbol of Indian nationalism and women’s empowerment. She truly believed in the ideals of Swami Vivekananda who once said, “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them”.

REFERENCES


