CHAPTER - IV

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I

F.R. Alexander wrote a number of searching articles in the Modern Review about Sister Nivedita’s role in the Indian Renaissance. He commented that in building up the structure of the Indian awakening Nivedita played a role of an architect; in her mind was drawn in firm lines the whole master plan and the method of execution of the plan for reconstruction of the nation. Alexander also noted the inexhaustible energy of Nivedita by virtue of which she could understand the nature of the problems confronting India and devise the ways to the resolution of the problems.

Prof. Binoy Sarkar observed that the name of Nivedita worked like a magic incantation to the young Bengal during the initial decade of the last century. She was a humanist, in every field a worker -- in education, politics, nationalism, industry, social welfare, development of women and their empowerment.

Nivedita’s active participation in the national struggle of India covers the period from the end of 1902 to the middle of 1911. And considering her great and unparalleled contribution to the building up the national awakening it must be acknowledged to be a very short span of time. The notable facts which moved the minds of the people of India during this important decade of the history of modern India were the spread of the Swami Vivekananda’s ideals which largely informed the national struggle, the Partition of Bengal of 1905 by Lord Curzon, Swadeshi Movement, the stirrings of the Revolutionary Movement, the real and the tangible contributions of the talented Indians towards Science, Literature, and other forms of Arts. It was truly the golden period of the history of Bengal, with some mind-blowing works of literary art and the keenly felt stirrings of the Renaissance ideals. During this important decade the educated and sensitive people could see the significance of Bengal mainly because of the Swadeshi Movement, the shifting of the capital of India from Calcutta to New Delhi, and, as one of the results of this, the initiation of the decline of Bengal’s influence in the national life. Great minds
were indeed there engaged in activities of national importance; pre-
independent Bengal was still the home of literary, scientific, cultural and
educational activities, true to the spirit of the Renaissance. Sister Nivedita
belonged to that golden period of Bengal; she was at once a product of that
period, and one of its creators.

In describing to Nivedita India’s march through the ages, Swami
Vivekananda pointed out how India had continued her pursuits of spiritual
goals despite all the reverses that she had suffered politically and otherwise.
This preoccupation with spirituality might have led her to neglect her other
interests with the result that she had become an easy victim to foreign
aggression and had suffered other consequential misfortunes, but it was
exactly this accent on spiritual values that had also sustained her through the
ages. Swamiji pointed out that nothing was basically wrong with India
except that she had to regain self-confidence, so that she might apply herself
with vigour and determination to the solution of the problems of food, health,
and education. He wanted his countrymen to study western science and
technology, but he was at the same time utterly opposed to the idea that
India should blindly imitate the West.

Swami Vivekananda himself had given to his countrymen the call for a
relentless struggle against poverty, social injustice, the disabilities to which
the women were then subject, exploitation of the weaker sections of the
society by those stronger and more advanced, and such other evils which
then beset Indian society. By virtue of his dynamic personality, his bold
optimism and progressive, yet truly Indian, views, he had become the
symbol of his countrymen’s unvoiced and ardent hopes and aspirations. He
had been able to rouse the country to a great height of enthusiasm; but he
was anxious that this enthusiasm should not dissipate itself in meaningless
exhibition, but was directed into channels of fruitful action with the ultimate
object of producing some permanent good to the country. Swamiji appealed
to many to work for the regeneration of the country, and while he was glad
to see many scattered groups of people pledging themselves to the service of
the country, he specially hoped that Nivedita should be likewise, for he had
felt that with her Celtic blood, her great vigour (‘a real lioness’), intellect, and
sincerity of purpose, she could contribute much more than anybody else he knew of. He once told her that his mission is 'simply to bring manhood' to his people. Swami Ji was glad that his Nivedita had then volunteered her services for that purpose. Luckily for India, Nivedita, too, with her perceptive mind, was not slow to recognise the greatness of India that lay hidden under all the sordidness that she saw on the surface of things as she went about the country. Also, once she had grasped the magnificence of India's achievements in the past and the potentialities she still possessed for future greatness, she had no difficulty in imbibing her Master's love for India and his zeal to serve her. In reply to a letter of Nivedita, Vivekananda wrote:

"My ideal indeed can be put into a few words and that is: to preach
Unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life ................ Religions in the world have become mockeries. What the world want is character. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word tell like thunderbolt.

............. I am sure you have the making in you of a world mover,............. Bold words and bolder deeds are what we want. Awake, awake, great ones! The world is burning with misery. Can you sleep? Let us call and call till the sleeping gods awake, till the god within answers to the call. What more is in life? What greater work? The details come to me as I go. I never make plan. Plans grow and work themselves. I only say, awake, awake!" ¹

Swami Ji had no readymade plan. What he wanted was earnest work done in a self-sacrificing spirit. What he wanted and what the world needed was men and women of character. The watchword of Vivekananda's preachings was character building.

Nivedita was keen on coming to India and seeing things herself with a view to working for India -- especially for India's women. But Swami Ji was doubtful whether Nivedita would be able to adjust herself to the climate and surroundings of India. A woman of Nivedita's education, character, and ability, no doubt, could do much for India, but at the same time he did not want that a British lady should come to patronise and perhaps look down upon India and her people. Miss Muller, an admirer of Vivekananda, had
already come to India, but she assumed superior airs which Swamiji did not
like at all. So, in a letter to Nivedita, Vivekananda frankly wrote:

"India cannot yet produce great women; she must borrow them
from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love,
determination, and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman
wanted.

Yet the difficulties are many. You cannot form any idea of the misery,
the superstition and the slavery that are here. You will be in the midst of a
mass of half-naked men and women with quaint ideas of caste, and isolation,
shunning the white skin through fear of hatred and hated by them intensely.
On the other hand, you will be looked upon by the white as a crank and
every one of your movements will be watched with suspicion.

Then the climate is fearfully hot; our winter in most places being like
your summer, and in the south it is always blazing.

You must think well before you plunge in, and after work, if you fail in
this or get disgusted, on my part I promise you, I will stand by you unto
death whether you work for India or not, whether you give up Vedanta or
remain in it. 'The tusks of the elephant come out, but never go back;' so are
the words of a man never retracted. I promise you that. Again, I must give
you a bit of warning. You must stand on your own feet and not be under the
wings of a Miss Muller or anybody else. Miss Muller is a good lady in her own
way, but unfortunately it got into her head, when she was a girl, that she
was a born leader and that no other qualifications were necessary to move
the world but money! ............." 2

Sister Nivedita at last came to India on January 28, 1898, and landed
at Calcutta. Vivekananda was there to receive her at the docks. She was
initiated on March, 25, 1898, by Vivekananda. It was on this occasion that
she gave up her family name and received the name 'Nivedita' ('the
dedicated'). After this she was by gradual steps, moulded into a new
personality by Vivekananda. It is often assumed that just because Nivedita
was of Irish origin, she had an inborn hatred of the English. This is not
correct. She was very much pro-English, having no knowledge of the great
wrong that had been done to India by the British. In this connection the
following description given in an authoritative biography of Nivedita is noteworthy:

"After her initiation the Swami (i.e. Vivekananda) had asked her to what nation she belonged then and to his surprise she had said 'to the English nation' and had spoken of her passion of loyalty and worship for the English flag, giving to it much of the feeling that an Indian woman would give to her Chosen Deity. The Swami had understood then that his disciple’s love for his country was only superficial. He had spoken no more about it."

But later, at Almora, a regular schooling of Nivedita started, and Vivekananda brought about a change of the angle of vision of Nivedita. Here we have to note the following:

"Nivedita was not aware of the wrongs that the English as the dominant power had done to India. So when the Swami openly and vigorously attacked the English in his morning talks, she stood for their defence. As in the London classes, she was the one who argued and protested, and always tried to protect her own judgements and assert her views.

The Swami could not tolerate blindness of half-views and prejudices born out of ignorance. So he pointed out errors in her judgements. For instance, one day Swami was praising the Chinese, Nivedita alleged that, as a race, they were notoriously untruthful. The Swami would not accept this misrepresentation and said that words like untruthfulness and social rigidity were very relative terms. He revealed a new standpoint, and then left the disciple to form her own view. He never dictated an opinion, nor did he call for any confession of faith. But when his disciple could not give an uncoloured judgement, he got impatient and irritated. 'Really, patriotism like yours is sin! All that I want you to see is that most people’s actions are the expression of self-interest, and you constantly oppose to this that a certain race is all of angels. Ignorance so determined is wickedness!'

Days passed thus in clashes and conflicts and the inner strife increased. The Swami rebuked and attacked Nivedita’s cherished deep-rooted preconceptions -- literary, social, and historical. It was obviously a conflict of two strong personalities........."
II

The role of Sister Nivedita in the national resurgence of India covered political as well as cultural aspects. To start with, we may try to be clear about the political role of Nivedita. She had acknowledged Swami Vivekananda as her Master and guide. Although Vivekananda’s message to India and the world was largely spiritual in character, his preachings within this country at any rate had strong political overtones. He wanted nothing less than a thorough national reawakening in India set against the background of the age-old glorious cultural tradition of the country dating her back to antiquity and continuing ever since as a living force in the country’s history, though sometimes obscured by temporary set-backs. The very object of his going to the West was to seek means for bringing about amelioration of the lot of India’s down-trodden millions and thereby initiate a vital and irresistible momentum for Indian resurgence.

Before going to the West Vivekananda had travelled far and wide in different parts of India, and acquired first-hand knowledge of the miserable condition of India’s living millions. In the words of Romain Rolland,

"Everywhere he shared the privations and the insults of the oppressed classes. In Central India he lived with a family of out-caste sweepers. Amid such lowly people who cower at the feet of society, he found spiritual treasures, while their misery choked him. He could not bear it." 5 Again Romain Rolland writes,

".............it was the misery under his (Vivekananda’s) eyes, the misery of India, that filled his mind to the exclusion of every other thought. It pursued him, like a tiger following his prey, from the North to South in his flight across India. It consumed him during sleepless nights. At Cape Comorin it caught and held him in its jaws. On that occasion he abandoned body and soul to it. He dedicated his life to the unhappy masses." 6

But the problem was that he had no money with which he could help the poverty-stricken people of India. Even the gifts from the Princes and Maharajas of India would be a mere drop in the ocean. Vivekananda then looked to the western world. He must appeal to the whole world. The whole world had need of India. This thought took final shape in the mind of
Vivekananda towards the end of 1892. He decided to go to the west to ask for the means to ameliorate the economic condition of India and to offer in exchange to America and Europe the spiritual message of India. By this time his whole mental outlook had undergone a change. He preached against all search for personal salvation. It was rather public salvation that should be sought, the regeneration of the mother country.

Vivekananda went to America in 1893, and visited England and the Continent of Europe in 1895-96. We don’t need going into the details of his triumphant career in the west. All that we need to note is that Vivekananda on his return to India in 1897 was given a most enthusiastic reception from one end of the country to the other, and that Vivekananda in his numerous speeches all over the country dealt with the national reawakening in India along with religious topics.

Vivekananda said with emotion and fervour:

"The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last, the seeming corpse appears to be awakening and a voice is coming to us -- away back where history and even tradition fails to peep into the gloom of the past, coming down from there, reflected as it were from peak to peak of the infinite Himalaya of knowledge, and of love, and of work, India, this motherland of ours -- a voice is coming unto us, gentle, firm, and yet unmistakable in its utterances, and is gaining volume as days pass by, and behold, the sleeper is awakening! Like a breeze from the Himalayas, it is bringing life into the almost dead bones and muscles, the lethargy is passing away, and only the blind cannot see, or the perverted will not see, that she is awakening, this motherland of ours, from her deep long sleep. None can resist her any more; never is she going to sleep any more; no outward power can hold her back any more; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet." 7

To this reawakening of India, so vividly described by him, Vivekananda made a unique contribution as every student of history knows and acknowledges. And the nationalist sentiment that was so strong and irresistible in Vivekananda, was naturally communicated by him to his favourite disciple Sister Nivedita. Swamiji chose Nivedita as a fit instrument,
not only for rousing the womanhood of India, but also for giving guidance and inspiration to the youth of India. This is vividly reflected in the following exhortation that Swamiji conveyed to Nivedita:

"The mother's heart, the hero's will,
The sweetness of the southern breeze,
The sacred charm and strength that dwell
On Aryan Altars, flaming, free;
All these be yours, and many more
No ancient soul could dream before --
Be thou to India's future son
The mistress, servant, friend in one." 8

Shortly after the death of Swami Vivekananda (on July 04, 1902), Sister Nivedita had to say good-bye to the Ramakrishna order. Nevertheless, ever afterwards she always signed her name as "Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda." On July 24, 1902, she wrote of Miss Macleod as follows:

"We talk of 'women-making.' But the great stream of the Oriental Women's life flows on -- who am I that I should seek in any way to change it? ............... Is it not rather by taking the national consciousness of the women like that of the men, and getting it towards greater problems and responsibilities, that one can help? ............... I don't know! ............... Only I think my task is to awake a nation, not to influence a few women." 9

From this it becomes quite clear that Nivedita was fully conscious of the responsibility she had taken upon herself to rouse the people of India from the morbid torpor into which they had sunk. She fully realised that nation-making, not merely women-making, was the great task that confronted her.

It is reasonable to presume that Vivekananda also thought that Nivedita's work was to be in a much wider field than merely that of running school for girls. First, this is evident from the poem that we have quoted above. Secondly, we may refer to some points in the letter that Swamiji wrote to Nivedita just before her coming to India early in 1898. Swamiji wrote to Nivedita (on July 29, 1897) as follows:

"Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great
future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man but a woman; a real lioness to work for the Indians, women specially.

India cannot yet produce great women. She must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted "^°  

The emphasis on ‘real lioness’ and ‘Celtic blood’ is highly significant and suggestive. Both point to a sturdy independence of character, that was essential not so much for ‘woman-making’ as for ‘nation-making.’

In this connection, the following conversation that once took place between Swamiji and Nivedita is noteworthy: “My mission is not Ramakrishna’s nor Vedanta’s nor anything, but simply to bring manhood to my people,” the Swami once said to Nivedita.

“I will help you, Swami,” she said,

“I know it”, he replied. 

Sometimes, a question is asked whether Nivedita was involved in any way in the Revolutionary Movement that swept over Bengal in the days of Anti-partition agitation. Some writers have taken pains to contradict this at some length. Some others have overemphasised the role of Nivedita in the revolutionary movement. We shall first mention these two view points, and then we shall proceed to make an objective assessment of the whole matter.

Brahmachari Arup Chaitanya writes:

“She never took any active part in the revolutionary movement, but keeping herself in the background, she gave encouragement to the revolutionaries. She was Irish by birth. Ireland had fought for her freedom. She often expressed views in favour of Ireland’s independence. Later, coming to India, she, while not taking any direct part in the freedom struggle of India, indirectly exhorted the youth to plunge into the freedom movement. She thought that Indians were weak in heart and soul(?), but she felt if the gospel of freedom and nationality was dipped into the ears of the Indians they would wake up and make self-sacrifice for the independence of the country.” 

Pravrajika Atmaprana takes great pains to show that Nivedita was not
associated with the terrorist movement. Most certainly not; but to encourage revolution was not necessarily to become a terrorist. Even an extremist leader of the revolutionary movement like Aurobindo Ghosh denounced terrorism; but he considered it to be an off-shoot of the highly repressive measures adopted by the government. In an ‘Open Letter to My Countrymen’, written in July, 1909, Aurobindo said:

“.............. with the stray assassinations which have troubled the country we have no concern, and, having once clearly and firmly dissociated ourselves from them, we need notice them no further. They are the rank and noxious fruit of a rank and noxious policy and until the authors of that policy turn from their errors, no human power can prevent the poison-tree from bearing according to its kind.” 13

In the post-independence period Sri Aurobindo declared openly that he had planned an armed insurrection, but at the same time he expressed disapproval of terrorism. He wrote: “It may be noted that secret society did not include terrorism in its programme, but this element grew up in Bengal as a result of the strong repression and the reaction to it in that province.” 14 If Aurobindo was against terrorism, Nivedita, it may be presumed, was no less so.

Nevertheless, we like to give a quotation from Atmaprana. She writes “.............. if she was a terrorist, why was she not arrested? The explanation given is that as she was a foreigner and had many friends among high officials she was not arrested. But if Nivedita had really indulged in terrorism, she would have been promptly arrested.” 15

No objection can be taken to this statement.

Then Atmaprana introduces an argument about Nivedita’s non-participation in terrorism on the basis of her intimate association with Dr. J.C. Bose. This is an argument of dubious value. Let us note, however, what Atmaprana writes:

“Another fact which proves her non-participation in terrorism is her relation with Dr. J.C. Bose. Since her return to India in 1902, till 1911, she was constantly helping Dr. Bose in writing his research books ............... Dr. Bose’s scientific work depended on Government aid. If he had close
connection with one who had affiliations with terrorism, the Government would have taken a sterner attitude, and Dr. Bose’s work would have suffered a lot. Dr. Bose was anxious about Nivedita’s political views and often requested her to be cautious. It was only after she met the Vicereine Lady Minto in 1910, and at her request met the Chief Commissioner of Police that Dr. Bose felt relieved and safe.” 16

We take strong exception to the above description given by Atmaprana, as it gives a distorted version of Nivedita’s attitude and outlook. Nivedita was nothing if not a woman of sturdy independence of character -- “a real lioness” as Vivekananda called her. She would not have refrained from any line of action that she thought proper only to oblige Dr. Bose, however her relation with the latter might have been. Nivedita gave her cooperation to Dr. Bose in a voluntary spirit of encouragement and helpfulness. If anything was applied by this, it was that Nivedita favoured Bose and it was not the other way about. Further, Nivedita did not seek favour and protection from any quarter. What happened, in fact, was that Lady Minto on her own initiative and quite unexpectedly went to Nivedita’s School, and later, at her request, Nivedita met the Commissioner of Police. 17 In Lady Minto’s book there is no mention of the kind of talk that Atmaprana hints at. 18 Above all, Atmaprana confuses revolution with terrorism. Nivedita might well have been inclined in favour of revolution (and in fact she was so inclined as we shall presently show), but that did not necessarily mean that she encouraged terrorism. But, before we come to this, we have to refer to the other exaggerated view that Nivedita was an outright anarchist and nihilist.

For instance, Girijasankar Roychowdhury writes:

“Some years before meeting Swámi Vivekananda in 1895, Nivedita (Margaret Noble) had come in contact with Kropotkin, 19 and under his influence became a revolutionary. At that time Surendranath Halder, Bar-at-law, had known Nivedita very well and he told me, ‘she was a nihilist of the worst type.’ At this time Nivedita actively participated in the Irish Home Rule Movement.” 20

In this context, we draw attention to the following exaggerated
account of Nivedita’s role --

“She did not remain unimplicated in the Muraripukur Road Laboratory ............... Nivedita did not hesitate to help these amateur chemists as best as she could. Daringly she smuggled them into the laboratories of the Presidency College as assistants of Jagadish Bose and P.C. Roy who was a professor of chemistry. Both needed laboratory aids. Both were of course unaware of Nivedita’s audacity in the matter of providing them.” 21

We now proceed to estimate Nivedita’s precise role in the revolutionary movement of Bengal on the basis of authoritative accounts given by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh and Dr. Bhupendranath Datta, both of whom played important parts in the revolution in Bengal. First, we consider what Aurobindo says in clear and unambiguous language.

Aurobindo refers first to Nivedita’s visit to Baroda (possibly sometime in 1902). He writes:

“I do not remember whether she was invited but I think she was there as a State guest, Khasirao and myself went to receive her at the station. I do not remember Nivedita speaking to me on spiritual subjects or about Ramakrishna and Vivekananda .............. I was very much enamoured at the time of her book, ‘Kali, the Mother’ and I think we spoke of that; she had heard, she said, that I was a worshipper of Force, by which she meant that I belonged to the revolutionary party like herself and I was present at her interview with the Maharaja whom she invited to support the secret revolution; she told that he could communicate with her through me. Sayaji Rao was much too cunning to plunge into such a dangerous business and never spoke to me about it.” 22

Elsewhere Aurobindo again writes as follows:

“That with my relation with Sister Nivedita -- they were purely in the field of politics ............. I met Sister Nivedita first at Baroda when she came to give some lectures there ............. it was in those days that we formed our friendship. After I had started my revolutionary work in Bengal through certain emissaries, I went there personally to see and arrange things myself. I found a number of small groups of revolutionaries that had sprung into existence but all scattered and acting without reference to each other. I tried
to unite them under a single organisation with the Barrister P. Mitra as the
leader of the revolution in Bengal and a central council of five persons, one of
them being Nivedita ............. By that time I had become one of the leaders of
the public movement known first as extremism, then as nationalism, but this
gave me no occasion to meet her (Nivedita), except once or twice at the
congress as my collaboration with her was solely in the secret revolutionary
field .............. I was busy with my work, she with hers, and no occasion arose
for consultations or decisions about the conduct of the revolutionary
movement. Later on, I began to make time to go and see her occasionally at
Baghbazar.

In one of these visits she informed me that the Government had
decided to deport me and she wanted me to go into secrecy or to leave
British India and act from outside.”

The account given by Sri Aurobindo leaves no room for doubt that
Sister Nivedita was deeply involved in the secret revolutionary work at any
rate at one critical phase of it.

Now, we turn to the account that has been given by Dr.
Bhupendranath Datta. His observations are found scattered in different parts
of his important work, ‘Swami Vivekananda -- the Patriot-Prophet.’ Dr. B.N.
Datta writes how Nivedita was giving an interpretation of a historical person
in her way which Dr. Datta could not appreciate. This irritated Nivedita.
“Angrily she said, ‘when I will be hanged then you will understand it!”
How could she speak of the possibility of her being hanged unless she was
involved in revolutionary work? More categorically Dr. Datta writes
elsewhere as follows : “Since the foundation of the Revolutionary Party in
Bengal ............ Swamiji’s British disciple Sister Nivedita took at first an active
part and was a member of the Executive Committee ............ This reaffirms
unequivocally Nivedita’s direct participation in the revolutionary movement at
a certain stage. Perhaps her participation could not continue because she
was out of India for quite sometime between 1906 and 1909.

In another context Dr. Datta writes:

“The writer met Sister Nivedita in the winter of 1909 in New York. At
that time, she talked of ‘Aurobindo’ who is not afraid of the ‘hangman’s
During this period one day Nivedita and the writer were invited to lunch at Miss Philip’s place. At the end of the lunch, during conversation Nivedita said: ‘Bhupen I consider you consecrated. Don’t marry.’ The import of these sayings: the hangman’s noose trailing Aurobindo, and the writer is consecrated -- are understandable to the revolutionaries only. This was the talk of a revolutionary with another revolutionary. The significance was understood by both of them.”

From all these, it would be evident and clear beyond a shadow of doubt that Nivedita had been involved deeply in the revolutionary movement at a certain stage. But at the same time Nivedita was much greater than a mere worker in the secret revolutionary field. She was a woman of high intellectual stature. She acquainted herself deeply with the spiritual and cultural treasures of India, accumulated from the earliest period to the modern period. In her voluminous writings and also in her speeches, she presented new and vivid accounts of the entire cultural background of India, drawing attention to Vedic and Upanishadic trends of thought, to the interesting tales of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and also to the later phases of Indian history. The great French writer M. Renan had occasion to remark that nationalism was based upon a common heritage of memories of the past whether of suffering and sacrifice or of achievement and glory. Nivedita reviewed memories of the past history of India, and with this past history as the background, she gave a new and broad-based interpretation of Indian nationalism.

Nivedita became convinced that there was no other way than that India should strive to be, by all means, mistress of her own fate, a free independent country. Arguing that a foreign Government, however good it might be, could be no substitute for a native Government, she said, “To my mind, what a people do not do themselves is ill-done, no matter how brilliant it seems.” Describing the British conquest of India as nothing short of gangsterism, she said, "India was absorbed in study; a gang of robbers came upon her and destroyed her land .......... Can the robbers teach her anything? No, she has to turn them out and go back to where she was before. Something like that, I fancy, is the true programme for India."
limit of a patriotic Indian's aspirations was then only to get from Britain bigger deeds of Indian representation in the services and in the legislature, she, a British woman turned Indian, would have nothing short of complete severance of all ties with Britain and unadulterated political freedom for India.

Nivedita now claimed her attention to spearhead a concerted move with leading Indians of the time to bring about a resurgence in the country. She concentrated on the task of marshalling all the progressive forces of the country to create with their help a new climate of vigour, hard work and creative activity in the country. In urging the country to shed its sense of defeatism and proceed with its programme of reconstruction entirely on national lines, Nivedita used her superb intellectual gifts to great effect. To her perceptive mind and her capacity to unravel the true meaning of the Indian symbols, forms, and rituals, which, according to Rabindranath, was amazing, she added a mastery of language that gave weight to whatever she said and carried conviction with her audiences. She had infinite faith in India which she exuded whenever she had occasion to make any pronouncement about her.

Nivedita frequently contributed articles to Indian journals on the burning topics of the day, telling the people in her characteristic manner never to lose heart in the face of the problems which confronted them, but to attack them with courage, and then, work to reconstruct India in a fashion that she might be as great in the future as she was in the past. Her articles appearing in the leading journals of the day did much to rouse the patriotic fervour of the people and direct their attention to the tasks that lay before them to make this vision real.

While Nivedita wrote an endless flow of articles trying to instil into the minds of the people a sense of pride for the past of the country and hope for its future, she, who had been known to be an accomplished speaker even when she was in England, now brought into play all her oratorial powers in the service of the Indian cause. She was often requested to address public meetings with other national leaders to voice the grievances of the people and put forward their legitimate political demands. Nivedita always
responded with alacrity, and as might be imagined, held her audiences enthralled. She always endeavoured to focus attention on India's strong points even in the condition in which she was then.

Nivedita by now became such a powerful factor in Indian life that it was impossible to conceive of any progressive movement in the country without her being associated with it in some way or other. She was in close touch with all the leading figures in public life then, who frequently visited her small house in Baghbazar to discuss with her problems of the country. Not only statesmen, but also men of letters, scientists, artists, university teachers, journalists, religious leaders, social reformers, research fellows, students -- in fact, men and women of all ranks and all professions visited her. To each of them she gave encouragement and, where possible, also active help and guidance. Many of them later freely acknowledged that it was largely due to her influence and encouragement that they achieved the success that they achieved in their respective fields. Even Rabindranath Tagore used to say that to none else did he owe so much as he did to Nivedita, though he also said that he had disagreements with her on many points. It is well-known that Dr. J.C. Bose's achievements in the field of scientific research would have been different, if not impossible, but for Nivedita's encouragement and help. She wrote articles about him in British journals to draw the attention of the public in general, and the world of science in particular to his work, fought against the prejudice which then prevailed against him in certain circles and cheered up his spirits when consistent opposition by a section of British scientists dejected him. What is more, she raised funds for him so that he could carry on his research without being too much inhibited by lack of finance, and even took him and his wife to her mother's home in the country for better care and rest when he fell ill. All this she did because she felt that Sir J.C. Bose could make significant contributions towards the progress of Indian Science, and she, like her Master, being convinced that India's paramount need was science and technology, was anxious to do all she could to help him overcome his difficulties so that he could serve the cause of Indian science as well as she believed he was capable of.
It is perhaps not known to many that it was Nivedita who first introduced Havel to the meaning and significance of Indian art, and it might have been this which led Havel later to advise Abanindranath Tagore to use Indian techniques rather than western in his art, thus paving the way for the great revival which took place in Indian art during the first decade of the twentieth century. She was not only the most ardent champion of Indian art, but also its most enlightened critic. If, in later years, the Western intelligentsia showed interest in Indian art and acknowledged that it possessed a charm and grandeur not to be found in its counterpart elsewhere, it was largely because of her and Coomer Swamy's interpretative writings on the subject.

III

Sister Nivedita looked deep beneath the surface and noticed the underlying unity and solidarity that the Indian National Congress represented in Indian politics. The unity and solidarity needed to be protected and fortified. She most earnestly urged that --

“.......... the real task of the congress is that of an educational body, educating its own members in that new mode of thinking and feeling which constitutes a sense of nationality; educating them in the habit of prompt and united action, of political trustiness, of communal open-eyedness : educating itself, finally, in the knowledge of a mutual sympathy that embraces every member of the vast household which dwells between the Himalayas and Cape Comorin, between Manipur and the Arabian Sea.”  

In saying all this, Nivedita struck the very key-note of nationality. As Zinumern had occasion to say, nationality is corporate sentiment of peculiar intensity, intimacy and dignity which is related to a particular homeland. Nivedita was laying stress on this sense of intimacy and intensity among the
people of India. India was large and it occupied a vast territory from the north to the south and from the east to the west. No doubt the sense of intimacy, which was the core of nationality, was in fair measure inborn in the Indian people, but it had also to be nursed and nourished to a great extent by a process of education. That was the great task before the Indian National Congress.

But Nivedita pointed out that beyond, behind and yet with the congress, there operated another great force -- the National Movement. The task of the National Movement was to lend added momentum and force to a 'Common sense of unity' operating subterraneously in the Indian sub-continent and struggling to come to the surface and fore-front. In 1905, Bengal, which was at the time politically the most conscious and advanced province in India, was partitioned by an outrageous and wanton decree of Curzon's government. The national consciousness of reawakened India found its characteristic expression in the people and leaders of Bengal. Nivedita spoke with ardour and deep feeling about the Swadeshi Movement which started from 1905. She said:

"It is necessary to say, and I feel that it cannot be said too strongly, that in the Swadeshi Movement the Indian people have found an opportunity to make themselves respected by the whole world. For the world respects that which shows that it is to be feared, and the one thing that is to be feared by all is strong, intelligent and united action. .............. The note of manliness, and self-help is sounded throughout the Swadeshi Movement. There is here no begging for help, no cringing for concessions. What India can do for herself, that she will do." 28

Sister Nivedita wrote about the Swadeshi movement in March, 1906. At that time the Swadeshi movement was at its height, particularly in Bengal. The circumstances in which this movement was launched and the manner in which it gathered momentum may be carefully considered at some length. We have to note some historical facts in this context. The Swadeshi movement was largely the outcome of Lord Curzon's policy. He came to India as the Viceroy in January 1899, and he retired from office on 18th November, 1905. After assuming power, he introduced various retrograde
measures. For instance, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation was transformed by him into an official body. He also interfered with the autonomy of the Calcutta University (and of two other universities) by passing a new Act:

At the convocation of the Calcutta University in February, 1902, he delivered an address in which he cast aspersions on the character of eastern people (pointing of course to Indians in particular). He said:

“If I were asked to sum up in a single word the most notable characteristics of the east -- physical, intellectual and moral -- as compared with the west, the word ‘exaggeration’ or ‘extravagance’ is the one that I should employ. It is particularly patent on the surface of the native Press.”

At the convocation of the Calcutta University in February, 1905, Lord Curzon said:

“The highest ideal of truth is to a large extent a western conception. Undoubtedly truth took a high place in the moral codes of the West before it had been similarly honoured in the east. We may prove it by the common innuendo that lurks in the words ‘oriental diplomacy’ by which is meant something rather tortuous and hypersubtle. The same may be seen in oriental literature. In your epics truth will often be extolled as virtue; but quite as often it is attended with some qualification, and very often praise is given to successful deception practised with honest aim. I remember reading in an Indian newspaper the following: ‘There is not a question that lying is looked upon with much more disfavour by European than by Native society. The English opinions on this subject are strong, distinct and uncompromising in the abstract. Hindu and Mohammedan opinions are fluctuating, vague and to a great extent dependent upon times, place, and persons’.

At the above convocation function Sister Nivedita was present. The allegation that Indians were prone to ‘deception’ and ‘lying’ which was cleverly and indirectly, but nevertheless obviously, hinted at, caused a sullen resentment in the mind of the Indian audience. And, in Nivedita, it brought about almost a revolt. The following should be noted in this connection:

“After Lord Curzon left the hall, Sir Gurudas Banerjee and others collected at the Senate Hall gates and discussed about it. Nivedita, equally furious joined them. She asked whether any of them had Lord Curzon’s
book, Problems of the Far East. Having got the book from Sir Gurudas Banerjee she sent to the press the next day the following writing in which along with a few lines from Lord Curzon’s speech was quoted an extract from his book. It was published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika on February 13 (1905), and was reproduced in The Statesman the following day.”

We have already noted the remarks in the convocation address. The excerpt from Curzon’s book which was reproduced by Nivedita in her unsigned article, we have to note now. This brings out how untruthful Curzon had been in his endeavour to build up a career for himself. The excerpt was as follows:

“Before proceeding to the royal audience, I enjoyed an interview with the President of the Korean Foreign Office. I remember some of his questions and answers. Having been particularly warned not to admit to have that I was only thirty-three years old, an age to which no respect attaches in Korea, when he put to me the straight question (invariably the first in an Oriental dialogue). How old are you? I unhesitatingly responded ‘Forty’.

— ‘Dear me’, he said, ‘you look very young for that. How do you account for it?’

— ‘By the fact’, I replied, ‘that I have been travelling for a month in the superb climate of his majesty’s dominions’.

‘Finally’, he said to me, ‘I presume you are a near relation of Her Majesty, the Queen of England,’ ‘No’, I replied, ‘I am not.’ But observing the look of disgust that passed over his countenance, I was fain to add, ‘I am, however, as yet, an unmarried man’, with which unscrupulous suggestion I completely regained the old gentle man’s favour.”

Thus, to gain favour in an interview Curzon did not hesitate to tell a blatant lie and to make an ‘unscrupulous suggestion’, and yet this man condemned orientals for their proneness to indulge in falsehood and praised westerners for their habitual truthfulness. Sister Nivedita exposed him completely though she did not disclose her identity in the article that she published in the papers. Rightly did Dr. J.C. Bose say: “The thunderbolt should always be behind dark clouds and they should not know from what
part of the heavens the weapon is hurled.”

Not content with publishing the above article Nivedita wrote an open letter to the editor of the Statesman, inviting reference once again to the convocation incident and making a specific mention of Prof. Max Muller’s tribute to the ‘Truthful character of the Hindus’ in his book ‘What India Has to Teach Us.’

Nivedita also made a disparaging reference to the ‘faultless silence’ with which the audience, particularly the students, received the objectionable remarks of Curzon, hinting that they might as well be less ‘goody goody’ and ‘step into manhood’ and defend their dead ancestors against false charges. In this context we have to remember the words of Nivedita’s biographer Lizelle Reymond who has rightly observed that Nivedita was more ‘manly’ than ‘womanly’ in her disposition, that she was utterly intolerant of morbid sentimentalism.

The most outrageous misdeed of Curzon was the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Though there were denials of partition plan by the Government from time to time, at last on 19th July, 1905 the Government adopted a resolution approving partition, and news of the same was published in the press next day. On 7th August, 1905 a mammoth meeting was held in the Town Hall in Calcutta to protest against the partition. Four resolutions were adopted in the meeting. In the first resolution it was stated that the partition was a wrongful act; it was unjustified and uncalled for. By second resolution the manner and method of introduction of partition was condemned. By the third resolution the continued boycott of British goods was approved until there was reversal of the partition plan. In the fourth resolution, it was stated that unrelenting struggle -- a raging and tearing campaign -- would be carried on against the partition.

On this day -- 7th August -- Nivedita made an important entry in her diary, and, further, she attended the Town Hall meeting. “Nivedita noted in her diary that day, ‘partition of Bengal meeting -- the black shadow.’ She attended the meeting but did not speak.”

An important offshoot of the anti-partition agitation was not only the boycott of British goods, but also the systematic encouragement of the use of
Swadeshi (indigenous) on as large a scale as possible. This Swadeshi movement received the fullest measure of support from Nivedita as evident from the quotation that we have already given above. The whole rationale of the Movement was discussed by Nivedita in a very interesting and convincing way. She pointed out, for instance, that the very logic of Swadeshi led to the injury of British interests -- it might jeopardise Lancashire or London -- but it had nevertheless to be adhered to steadfastly. She wrote with vehemence:

"Let none talk nonsense about other lands! On Indian men and women is laid the responsibility of caring for the Indian poor. And let there never be forgotten the curse of the Gita on the man who does another's duty instead of his own. 'Better for a man is his own duty, however badly done, than the duty of another, though that be easy. The duty of another leads into great peril.' Let Manchester go! Let London go! It is for the Indian people to do their own duty." \(^{38}\)

Nivedita also pointed out that Swadeshi was a sort of Tapasya. Its success was not to be judged by the enormity of results. The effort itself was salutary, and all India was watching with interest the effort in Bengal. It had a spiritual and national significance, it was not merely a matter of politics or economics. Referring to the question of the rewards of Swadeshi Tapasya, Nivedita wrote:

"First we must understand that no work was ever wasted. Every vibration of struggle brings its own results. When enough force has gone out, victory is the return. Ultimately, there is no such thing as defeat. A clear will frustrated, only becomes the clearer. Loss becomes then nothing but gain delayed. Again, victory depends only on effort, never on talk. All India is watching today the struggle that is going on in .......... Bengal. Scarcely a word appears on the papers, yet the knowledge is everywhere. The air is tense with expectation, with sympathy, with pride in those grim heroic people and their silent struggle to the death, for their Swadeshi trade. Quietly all India is assimilating their power." \(^{39}\)

Nivedita also recognised that there were difficulties which had to be faced and overcome. There were difficulties, for instance, both in matters of production and distribution. Nivedita wrote:
“the serious difficulties of the Swadeshi movement lie in the two great fields of Production and Distribution. The obstacle offered by insufficient production is understood by all of us. Indeed it has been the strong and spontaneous union of efforts to bring production up to the required level, in which has lain the dawning hope and joy of all the workers. In distribution, however, we have a problem equally refractory to solve. For even when we know that a certain article is made in the country, we do not yet know where to obtain it. Or the shop at which it can be bought is apt to be inaccessible, or insufficiently supplied.”

On the distribution aspect of the problem, Nivedita laid very special emphasis, and in doing so she naturally interlinked together Swadeshi and boycott. She suggested that “each town shall form a Swadeshi Committee, to keep a register of all industrial undertakings, and of the shops at which the products can be found, and also to promote the scale of Swadeshi, rather than Bideshi articles at the local shops.” Thus on the one hand, Swadeshi (indigenous goods) had to be pushed and patronised; on the other hand, the Bideshi (foreign) goods had to be discouraged -- boycotted. She also specifically mentioned that, “The shops must be assisted as far as possible to disentangle themselves from the foreign trade.” Nivedita concluded:

“The Swadeshi Movement has come to stay, and to grow and to drive back for ever in modern India, the tides of reaction and despair.”

So far as the political aspect of the movement of 1905 was concerned, it gathered great momentum from the date of the enforcement of the Partition on 16th October, 1905. Huge demonstrations and meetings were organised to protest against the partition, in which distinguished leaders of Bengal took a prominent part. Particularly noteworthy were the roles played by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, Surendranath Banerjee and Bipin Chandra Paul. The cry went forth: the settled fact of partition must be unsettled.

Towards the end of 1905, the annual session of the Congress was held at Benaras under the presidency of the moderate leader, Mr. G.K. Gokhale. Nivedita attended this Congress. In this connection the following graphic account is noteworthy:
“Nivedita had been invited by Mr. Gokhale to attend the Congress. She reached Benaras on December 25, 1905, and put up at a house at Tilbhandeswar. Though she did not participate in the proceedings, she attended all the sittings and followed the proceedings with profound interest. Her house in Tilbhandeswar was a meeting place of all leaders. She was naturally not in agreement with the views of the Moderates and was glad that the Extremists carried their point ................. An interesting instance show how cautiously Mr. Gokhale tried to proceed to check the enthusiasm of the Extremists. At one time during the sessions the members observed the presence of Sarala Devi Chowdhurani. Some of them asked Mr. Gokhale to request her to sing the Bande Mataram song. The singing of that song in public meeting was prohibited in Bengal. Though they were in Benaras, Mr. Gokhale thought that it would unnecessarily arouse the Government’s ire. But on the insistence of the members Mr. Gokhale had to request Sarala Devi to sing only a few lines of the song. She, of course, sang the whole song and it was highly appreciated.

After the Congress deliberations were over, the usual vote of thanks was given to Mr. Gokhale as the President. After some Indian speakers had addressed the gathering, Nivedita rose to thank him. She thanked him not as others had done for his great political services to India, but for his still greater spiritual services to England in trying to make England just and thus saving her from herself. The implication was well understood and appreciated by the radicals.”

Nivedita’s friendship with G.K. Gokhale seems no doubt to have been a bit strange, since Gokhale was a moderate leader, and was constantly apprehensive of giving offence to the Government. Nivedita, on the other hand, had a strong temper and her disposition was that of an ardent revolutionary. Her revolutionary bent of mind brought her into closest contact with Sri Aurobindo, the arch-revolutionary of the Swadeshi movement between 1905-1910. Aurobindo had a thorough distrust of Gokhale and even regarded him as a government spy.

In these circumstances it is rather puzzling that Nivedita was hand in glove with Aurobindo, and at the same time she befriended Gokhale, the
arch-moderate. Not unjustifiably the critic might say, it was like running with the hare and hunting with the hound. We have to observe that Nivedita was a resolute fighter in the cause of Indian’s freedom and as such a fighter she was determined to mobilise all the national forces of the country in a supreme endeavour to bring about the political emancipation of India. That was why she did not like at all any division, either inside or outside the Congress, into Moderates and Extremists. She was extremely keen on the presentation always of a united front by all of India’s leaders against alien Government. In her view the real strength of India would lie in her solid and resolute unity which would baffle all attempts of the foreign rulers to thrive on a policy of divide and rule.

Nivedita firmly expressed the view that she had no doubt whatever about the patriotism of Gokhale. She even went to the length of admiring the manliness of Gokhale, while she described herself as ‘only a woman’. At the same time there is clear indication of the difference that existed between Gokhale’s line of action and the line of action that was being pursued by Nivedita or for which she had a strong prediction. Wistfully she writes to Gokhale, “I wish I could infect you with my view of the whole thing.” She also says that, it is no use devoting all energies towards the ‘reform of abuses’; what was necessary was to ‘make life’. She believed in “the festival of struggle and growing life.” Altogether, there was a wide gulf between Nivedita who was a ‘revolutionary’, and Gokhale who was a moderate of moderates. Nevertheless, Nivedita would conclude her letters to Gokhale declaring herself ‘ever your true friend’ -- she might not see eye to eye with Gokhale on all points, not even on the basic points, but she appreciated the work that Gokhale was doing in his own ‘moderate’ way.

Again and again Nivedita wrote to Gokhale expressing her deep appreciation of the speeches that he was making in his capacity as a member of the Governor General’s Council. In a letter, Nivedita expressed appreciation of Gokhale and wished him God-speed, but at the same time she insisted on the value of the more radical line of action that she was pursuing. She wrote:

“You have my infinite thanks for this morning’s letter and for your
kindness -- more needed than you knew -- about the books. I understand
every word you say. My greatest hope, as I bid you God-speed -- and I do
that with all my heart -- is that some day you may have cause to bless the
memory of a few who went by my road in order that your work might be the
more stable and enduring. Not one moment or one effort of yours but will
bear its mighty, unspeakably precious fruit. But I and my methods are
necessary to it, and you will yet say so yourself." 47

The following remarks by Nivedita also carried an important
significance and were in all probability intended to influence Gokhale:

"The boycott meanwhile is spreading even to women and priests --
and the amount of sacrifice that has been made is extraordinary. I always
feel that by this particular power of unknown people to perform obscure acts
of sacrifice under a dominating idea of the community, you can exactly
measure the national potentiality. It was by this power in the Russian People
that Napoleon's march on Moscow was turned into a disaster. It was by the
same power that a few months ago seemed unborn amongst us. Today it is
seen on all sides. This is the element of hope -- that outshines all others.
Even petty shop keepers are found to remonstrate with Indian customers
who ask for a videshi commodity." 48

The few lines above reveal the depth of Nivedita's feeling -- her
complete self-identification with sentiments and emotions of outraged
Bengali's who were so aggrieved about the partition of Bengal. She saw in
the resurgence in Bengal the same national fervour that was discernible in
Russia's resistance to Napoleon when she was invaded by the latter's vast
army, also in the American War of Independence against England which
enabled her throw off the colonial yoke and gain freedom and so on. The
tremendous and irresistible force of Nationalism against all attempts at
domination and oppression by imperialist powers was emphasised vigorously
by Nivedita. Above all, she gave vent to her joyous appreciation and
approval of boycott which meant a considerable sacrifice on the part of the
common people in as much the British goods boycotted could not be
immediately substituted by indigenous goods, the production of which was
simply not there at all or was hopelessly inadequate. Gokhale saw in boycott
nothing but vindictiveness, but Nivedita showed keen awareness of the self-sacrifice that it involved on the part of the people.

What is important to note is that Nivedita was closely connected with every attempt which was being made then to take India forward, be it political, social or intellectual. In some cases, she herself initiated the attempt, while in others, she gave it strength, vigour or new turn, to ensure that it might progress further and help the country. So great was her dynamism that anyone who came in contact with her felt inspired to work for his own improvement and also, use whatever means he had at his command, in the service of the country. Her greatest contribution was that she taught the Indians to have faith in themselves, to believe that it was possible for them to achieve great things, and also, that they were a distinct nation with much to be proud of. Commenting on her contributions she had made towards the awakening of India, Dr. Rashbehari Ghosh remarked, "If the dry bones are beginning to stir, it is because Nivedita breathed the breath of life into them .............. If we are conscious of budding national life at the present day it is in no small measure due to the teaching of Sister Nivedita."

Notes and References

11. Pravrajika Atmaprana, p. 88; See also Letters, Vol. I, p. 82.
14. Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother, Pondicherry, 1953, p. 44.
15. Pravrajika Atmaprana, p. 197.
30. Reference was to Indian Mirror, Calcutta.
33. 'I' refer to Curzon himself.
35. Pravrajika Atmaprana, op. cit., p. 188.
41. Ibid, p. 284.
42. Ibid, p. 284.
44. Pravrajika Atmaprana, op. cit., p. 192.