



Sister Nivedita's Observations on Indian History and Culture

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AMONG THE DISCIPLES OF Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita was held in high esteem by both moderate and extremist leaders of early twentieth century India. Unlike other Westerners, she did not come to patronise Indians but to serve them. She made sincere efforts to study our scriptures and history. This,

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she did exceptionally well, that too within a short span of thirteen years. Her books that are still very popular prove her deep scholarship and intellectual integrity in upholding our claim to a rich cultural heritage. She reached Indian shores only on 28 January 1898 and passed away on 13 October 1911. Before coming to India, except for attending two or three lectures of Swamiji, she had no exposure on Indian culture or its spiritual literature. In spite of these limitations, she

did grasp the core of Indianness and history of its civilisation within such a short period, which in itself is a remarkable achievement.

Definition of History

'The character of a people is their history as written in their own subconscious mind and to understand that character we have to turn on it the limelight of their history.'¹ The premium is therefore on the character or culture of a people and history is merely a help to decipher what is written on their subconscious mind; in other words their civilisation. History is not merely a chronological account of kings and kingdoms as is popularly understood. On the other hand it is the record of the community's civilisational progression. Civilisation of a people is determined by their geographical location, climate, natural resources, and the civilisations in their neighbourhood. The task of history is to delineate such factors that have gone into the making of a nation. Her view is that a kingdom or an empire is the expanded organisation of people, the smallest being a tribal set up or village council. When tribal loyalties are subordinated to embrace national loyalties, a nation is borne. When such a nation evolves a political organization, it is a nation state. From this it follows that a State—nation State—to exist, the people should have a common cultural background. A common language or religion may be some of the desirable condition but not at all the essential. Here lies the crux of Sister Nivedita's findings that India, long before the establishment of Mauryan empire in the fourth century BC, was not only culturally but also emotionally united. It is on record that Chandragupta after defeating the Greeks who were in occupation of the North-Western India, returned to Pataliputra to rule. Evidently, the empire had sufficient road and communication

network to command the forces and to maintain supplies from such a distant place. The port city of Tamralipti—modern Tamruk—in the eastern coast was linked by road to Banaras in the north. Chanakya himself states in his monumental work *Arthashastra* that Dakshinapath—the southern road—is safer than the Uttarapath—northern road—that leads to Taxila, in the present-day Pakistan, for conduct of trade. So she concludes that 'the Indian people may be defective in the methods of mechanical organisation, but they have been lacking, as a people, in none of the essentials of organic synthesis' (4.13).

Taxila was the gate way into India at the north-west frontier from where roads opened to China, Nineveh, Persepolis, and Babylonia. At this cross junction not only exchange of goods and services took place but also cultural elements like arts and architecture. Western scholars notably Grund Wedel, Fergusson, and Vincent Smith have contended that India borrowed decorative arts from the Greeks and Persians. They had pointed out that the winged animals of Sarnath are Greek in origin and Pillars in Ajanta cave resemble the one in Persepolis. Statues in Ajanta caves belong to two distinct styles. The earlier one, as Buddha seated on his throne as in Sarnath is purely Indian in style. The later ones, when Khandesh region was under Vakataka rule, are slightly different. Here the Buddha is standing with a Roman upper-cloth on his shoulders. This is clearly a modification incorporating Greek cultural elements. Sister Nivedita with her sharp intellect, with the precision of a surgeon's knife cuts through these superficial readings and asserts Indian originality, albeit a few decorative elements that are Greek. Perhaps these scholars did not realise that, unlike Indians, Greeks and Romans made naked statues. We can therefore

find Greek influence in Gandhara arts and Buddha statues found in present day Afghanistan. 'Unless then there should be unimpugnable evidence to the contrary, the rule being that ideals create symbolisms as their vehicle, and the source of Buddhist thought having always been Magadha, we should expect that that country would also be the creative centre in matters of Buddhist art' (4.73). The railed Balconies of Rajput and Mughal architecture bear definitely the stamp of Persia. However what is to be appreciated is the genius of our forefathers who absorbed these elements to create something unique and bearing undoubtedly the stamp of Indian creativity.

Sister Nivedita placed much reliance on travel for historical research, as in the absence proper, except a few works like *Rajatarangini*, India is the only source book for historical research. She states: 'If India itself be the book of history, it follows that travel is the true means of reading that history' (4.11). She further adds: 'In history also, we want to be able to see, not the thing that would be pleasant, but the thing that is true' (4.12). She notes that from the relics of Rajgir and other locations of historical importance, we can definitely map the historical sequence and how one style replaced a prevailing style, associated with a particular religious entity. Thus the entwined Tamarind trees might have replaced the Bo tree and tombs of Muslim peers the Buddhist stupas. It also helps us to know the disposal of population at the particular period.

The Shakya prince turned Gautam Buddha was the first and only religious preacher who encouraged evangelization in ancient India. He preached his eight fold path to the peasants of the vast Gangetic plain for their salvation. Though he did not establish a church, he had caught the imagination of the plebian

that till then was unconcerned with the high philosophical moorings of the Vedas and Upanishads. To them he preached his system of thought in their colloquial language and therefore, he for the first time nationalized the Indian peasants. 'To Gautam Buddha the peasant of Bihar owes his place in Hinduism. By Him he was nationalised' (4.40-1). Till then, only the upper crust of the society could afford the costly Vedic rituals or comprehend the high platitudes of the philosophy of the Upanishads. Her guru, the venerable Swami Vivekananda, had asserted, as early as in his third lecture to Parliament of Religions 1893: 'I repeat, Shakya Muni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus.'² She, his favourite disciple has taken the cue and came up with an unambiguous assertion: 'Socially Buddhism in India never consisted of a church but only of a religious order. Doctrinally it meant the scattering of that wisdom which had hitherto been peculiar to Brahmin and Kshatriya amongst the democracy. Nationally it meant the first social unification of the Indian people. Historically it brought about the birth of Hinduism.'³ This is true because the Indian character is such that it accommodates all diverse views and do not divide people on religious lines. Because of the magnetic personality of Gautam Buddha, all choose to follow him and later, on his Nirvana, they installed him as God incarnate. The religious order founded by him dwindled for historical reasons and disappeared in India. It survives to this day in China and East Asia. The reason is not far to seek. Ancient China had a moral law giver or philosopher like Confucius, who was not concerned with theology and God. This gap was filled by Buddhism. On the other hand, in India, we had the religion of

the Vedas and Buddhism was the catalyst for its rebirth as the present day popular Hinduism.

Sister Nivedita also states the apparent: 'It may be well to say that Buddhism did not originate the ideas which in their totality make up Hinduism' (4.81). She was the first to assert that: 'But one of the master-facts in Indian history, a fact borne in upon us more deeply with every hour of study, is that India is and always has been a synthesis' (4.12-3). Therefore she traces

the progression of the religion of the Vedas to present day popular Hinduism through the intellectual field ploughed and watered by Buddhism. The great preacher himself has become the god-head as Shiva of the Shaivites and Lord Jagannath of the Vaishnavites. In the age of Puranas the transformation was complete. No one can miss the similarity in shape of Buddhist Stupas to *Shiva-lingas* and *Shalagrama-shilas* that are the object of ritual worship of Shaivites and

This Painting 'The Victory of Buddha' by Abanindranath Tagore was Used as the Frontispiece to 'Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists' by Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy, 1913.



Vashnavites respectively. She also notes the fact that all the major centres of Hindu pilgrimage lay on the Himalayan route to Tibet and China. Perhaps these temples, once frequented by Buddhist pilgrims on their journey to and from Tibet, might have re-emerged as Hindu places of worship on disappearance of Buddhism from India. The Vedic god Rudra was re-invented in the age of Puranas as Shiva, whose image as a mendicant is strikingly similar to the Shakya prince who renounced his kingdom for the sake of the true path. Resilience is the real strength of Hinduism and the secret of its survival for more than five thousand years.

This daughter of India from the other shores was in full sympathy with the aspirations of the Indian masses. She wanted to contribute for the rejuvenation of the Nation which was the sole mission of her Guru. In the beginning she had placed much reliance on the sense of justice of the British people. However later on she realised that the exalted British claims of human rights and rule of law is only for the Britishers and not for the masses of the colonies. She therefore became fully sympathetic to the aspirations of the Nationalists. She was an able defender of India and her civilisation. Her book *The Web of Indian Life* was a convincing reply to the unfair criticism of the European missionaries, notably Ms Catherine Mayo.

Her premium for Indian rejuvenation was national unity. She wrote: 'The Mogul Empire fell into decay and failed, simply because it did not understand how to base itself on a great popular conception of Indian unity. It could neither assimilate the whole of the religious impulse of India, nor yet detach itself completely from it. Hence, as a government, it succeeded neither in rooting itself permanently, nor in creating that circuit of national energy which alone could have given it endurance.'⁴ She also wanted to

instil a sense of pride in the intellectual achievements of our ancestors and readily conceded their superiority to the Europeans. On her visit to Rajgir, the ancient capital of Magadha, she remarked: 'Well may the Indian people glory in the ancestry which already lived in this splendour, while that of Northern and Western Europe went clad in painted woad.'⁵ Such kind remarks from a European were welcome at a time when Missionaries rejoiced in deriding India and her religion.

In his introduction of her famous work *The web of Indian Life*, poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote 'And this was the reason which made us deeply grateful to Sister Nivedita, that great-hearted Western woman, when she gave utterance to her criticism of Indian life. She had won her access to the inmost heart of our society by her supreme gift of sympathy. She did not come to us with the impertinent curiosity of a visitor, nor did she elevate herself on a special high perch.'⁶ These words are sufficient to prove that the observations of Sister Nivedita on Indian history and culture were constructive and helpful to inspire the young.



References

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