SISTER NIVEDITA AND INDIAN ART

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It is only natural for a lot of good words to flow when a special anniversary year of a great human is celebrated. But what is of more importance to us is the discovery or rediscovery of certain facets of the person's life and contributions that may have escaped our notice in the past or on which we have not given adequate importance. The recent celebrations on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Margaret Noble, better known as Sister Nivedita, has also followed this expected trail and several expositions of her sterling service to the Indian nation and people have been highlighted. We have, thus, come to know more of this wondrous lady from distant Ireland and the British Isles, who disowned her homeland to adopt this country as her own and loved it so dearly. As a vibrant, energetic and highly articulate woman who had taken up so many tasks and missions simultaneously, it is difficult to pinpoint and analyse her multifarious contributions. In this article I have focussed mainly on her contribution to Indian art which is a subject that is either unknown to most people or has been relegated to a corner when discussing her lasting legacy. I have relied on her original articles on art published in the ModernReview that were later placed into the third volume of the Complete Works of Sister Nivedita by the Advaita Ashram. I have used materials from her own books like Footfalls of Indian History that contains her valuable work on The Ancient Abbey of Ajanta. Two very recent publications, which Pravrajika Asheshprana's Sister Nivedita and the Indian Art Movement as well as Reba Som's Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda have proved to be of great help. I have also referred to Sankari Prasad Basu's works like Nivedita Lokmata, NBT's Women Pioneers: The Indian Renaissance, EB Havell's Indian Sculpture and Painting (1908), R Siva Kumar's Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore and some other articles and books.

Before focussing on Nivedita's work in the field of art, it may be necessary to give a few words on her legacy as a whole. She had first met swami Vivekananda in London in 1895 and had been impressed with his words and his task, but it was only in 1896 during his next visit that she realised that she wanted to follow the great man in his mission to India, to rescue the suppressed and demoralised Indian nation reach its due place in the world. After some initial reluctance, Swamiji agreed and in 1897, she set sail for Calcutta. She is best known as Swamiji's prime foreign follower, a devout white Hindu, who adopted India as her own country. She is revered as a bold British lady who defied the might of the Empire and disowned her own people to take up the cause of India. She picked up the thread that Swamiji started and her greatest contribution lay in arousing the Indian people out of their induced slumber and arise as a nation that could and should be proud of its long heritage and civilisation. She was moulded by Vivekananda and she never left his dream in life but she also took up challenges like fearlessly helping those who were branded as terrorist by the British. Her contribution to the upliftment of Indian girls and women as a whole is remembered and the school that she set up for girls from the most orthodox Bengali families is celebrated. She was a powerful writer and an articulate speaker who made it her duty to explain to the western world that India was certainly not the terrible place that they imagined. She translated Rabindranath Tagore's works into English and, at the same time, she was a great champion of Indian science. What is less known is that she was a great supporter of Indian art.

Her love for the fine arts of ancient India as well as for the indigenous hand crafted work of her times were both deep, genuine and fascinating, because they were at two different levels. As Reba Som says "when Nivedita came to India, she was fascinated with the wide range of local handicrafts and cottage industries that continued in artisan families through the ages and were now under threat in the mechanical age. She found in Vivekananda a mentor who explained to her the traditional crafts heritage of India, which she found invaluable." (Som: 195) Nivedita's empathy with the poor but highly skilled craftsmen of India who represented the eternal tradition and values of this nation and emphasised the continuity of skills that had been mastered over centuries and millennia. As against this continuity, the fine arts of this country like painting, frescoes, carvings, sculpture and architecture had gone trough several painful ruptures and breaks. In fact, so devastating had these dark periods been that both India and the world had forgotten the glory of India's high level of artistic achievements, which provided an excuse for the British rulers to criticise India and Indians as an aesthetically backward nation. Indians were partly to blame as during the Brahmanic resurgence from the Gupta period onwards, the previous magnificence and undoubted efflorescence of Buddhist art in caves, stupas and chaityas had been ignored and left to collapse. Even the ruins were ignored until the very memory of 'the wonder that was India' was lost. Nivedita's mission was, therefore, to shatter this amnesia and re-instil a sense of self pride in India's past without which no national spirit could be revived. For Nivedita, the reawakening of India's arts were an extension of her passion to spread the message of nationalism among Indians. She wrote that "I....think that our greatest work in modernising India might be done through Art, instead of through the Press or the Universities. It is Art as of....the National Sense that we need" (Nivedita Letters, to Yum, 26 Jan 1905, Vol 2, pp 714-5)

Nivedita or Margaret Noble had no formal training in art but she had developed her skills as someone who understood the subject, which can be rather complex at times, and was later regarded as a qualified 'art critic'. She was not a painter but she had the eyes of one. Her role in promoting Indian art arose as an essential part of her overarching vision of nationalism in India at a time and in a age when it was an almost impossibly uphill task. In a way, therefore, her emphatic promotion of Indian art was an extension of her passionate national spirit but in the process she helped to give birth to a completely new school of Indian art. We shall discuss this as we move along. Margaret's earliest formal acquaintance with art appears to have taken place in 1892 when she was 25 years old and had already made a name as a school teacher and head. She set up her own school in Wimbledon, London, in that year and appointed a friend, Ebenezer Cook who was a well known painter. From him she learnt the intricacies of art for three years, till 1895 when she met Swami Vivekananda during his lectures in London. Her world view changed radically thereafter and she was destined to follow him to India in 1897-98 and be ordained by Swamiji with the vows of a celibate Brahmacharini in Kolkata and become Sister Nivedita. Her short acquaintance with art in Wimbledon would, however, play a very significant role in her life and in the lives of art-loving Indians. She could wean them away from the pervasive influence of western art only because she knew the subject and could marvel at the sheer beauty and majesty of Indian paintings, frescos, sculpture and architecture.

Upon arriving in India in January 1898, Margaret assumed the new mantle of Sister Nivedita and became one of Swami Vivekananda's chosen disciples and communicator. She adopted herself

without complaint to her new motherland and assimilated into a completely new lifestyle and culture. There is no doubt that she loved India from her heart, despite the heat and disease, the squalor and misery, the mind boggling poverty and the hard life as well as the great distance it was from her home. She plunged headlong into social work and as soon as plague hit Kolkata, she was on the forefront to tackle the deadly disease. She swept the garbage from the streets herself and this was a great eye opener to the people of Kolkata, who slowly joined this cleanliness campaign even though direct touch with garbage was impure according to their religion. Even the newly joined monks of the Ramakrishna Mission were induced to leave their scriptural studies and austerities to come out on to the streets in the service of the people. This act of Nivedita had a long lasting effect on the mission that had monks who had imagined that their role was to be within the ashram in prayers and not in the hurly burly of life and in the service of those who cried for help. In this manner, she stormed through life for next fourteen years for she died at the young age of just 44.

Swamiji left the world in 1902 and from this time Nivedita moved away from the Ramakrishna Mission and became totally immersed in her public life, that included her passionate espousal of India. She dwelt on its history, its religion, its culture, its women and anything else that could help her tell the world how a great ancient civilisation was being repressed and crushed by British imperialism. And, in this discourse, the Indian nation and its freedom was uppermost even when most Indians could hardly appreciate why the country required to throw off the yoke of the Empire. She picked up every possible facet of this civilisation and sought to highlight it before Indians first, in order to make them more acutely conscious of their own legacy that they had either forgotten or could not appreciate. From 2006 till the end of her life, we come across a wealth of Nivedita's writings on Indian art, sculpture, architecture and paintings. In fact, her main thrust that Indian art was not a gift of the western world, especially the Greeks, had been espoused by Swami Vivekananda in the Paris Conference of 1900, where he gave a brilliant exposition rejecting the dominant thesis that it was Hellenic art to which India owed everything.

Nivedita's meeting with EB Havell, the legendary principal of the Government School of Art of Kolkata, made a profound influence on her. An art historian and art critic of international renown, Havell is really the pioneer of the revival of India's ancient artistic styles. It was he who confirmed what Swamiji had felt and Nivedita had guessed, that Indian art predates much of European art and grew independent of the Greek tradition. Nivedita was in full agreement with Havell, who, she remarked, "rightly feels that Indian art is only to be understood through Indian ideals". She quotes from Havell's book Indian Sculpture and Painting "The Greeks no more created Indian sculpture and painting than they created Indian philosophy and religion. The (Greek) aesthetic ideals were essentially different from those of India and they never imposed them on Indian art, which, in its distinctive and essential character, is entirely the product of Indian thought and Indian artistic genius." [CWSN p 22]

Preaching this became her mission for the next ten years, much more than is generally believed. The thrust of this article is to give an insight into Sister Nivedita's contribution to the development of India's indigenous art tradition. It was her unlimited energy and her sincere support to the efforts of Havell and Abanindranath Tagore that helped to bring this school of art beyond art circles into the discourse of mainstream India. She played a crucial role in linking the ancient art

tradition as an essential and inseparable part of India's national awakening. EB Havell and Aban Tagore redefined Indian art education and established the Indian Society of Oriental Art that rejected the British imperial theory and Nivedita redefined the views and perceptions of common Indians towards their own art heritage She had met Havell first in February 1902, i.e, a few months before Swamiji's death and was indeed gratified to learn that his ideas on Indian art tallied with hers. His early works like Taj and its Environs (1903) and on Benaras (1905) contained the seeds of his belief that Indian art had deep and ancient roots in India and was not borrowed from abroad, but it was mainly in his later Essays on Indian Art, Industry & Education (1908) and more so in his grand one on Indian Sculpture and Painting (1908) that Havell spelt out his bold departure from the imperial mindset in clear terms.

She was also profoundly influenced by, and also influenced, the young Ananda Coomaraswamy who went on to become the foremost international interpreter of Indian art. Nivedita joined Havell and Coomaraswamy in contesting the views of British imperial art scholars like John Woodroffe and Lord Kitchener. This required knowledge of not only art but also the history and civilisation of India and the facts with which these better known experts could be proven to be wrong. Art was, after all, not a political or polemical debate. Another art personality who she admired a lot was Rabindranath's nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, who was not only an established painter but very well versed in western techniques. He was Vice Principal of the Government College of Art of Calcutta and she persuaded him to look at Indian art seriously, until he became the first great master of the Indian form, popularly known as the Bengal School. He openly acknowledged Nivedita's role in his conversion and his Bharatmata remains a classic piece of art. She was profuse in her praise in the Modern Review: "How can a man be a painter of a nationality? Can an abstract idea be given form and clothed with flesh and painted? Undoubtedly, it can. Indeed, if we had questioned this, then Mr AN Tagore's exquisite picture of Bharatmata would have proved its possibility." Thus, some Indian artists were finally able, in slow measures, to break free of western oil on canvas or board and not only paint with a high degree of sensitivity and delicateness, but also focus on the Indian sentiment or bhava. There were, of course, painters like Ravi Varma who painted distinctly Indian mythological themes but using western techniques and styles.

Nivedita was friendly with the Japanese revolutionary and thinker, Okakura and non-western elements in oriental art were fascinating to her, as well as to her companions like Havell and Abanindranath Tagore. They discussed art fir hours together at the Tagore residence at Jorasanko with Japanese art experts like Taiken and Hishida, but European art experts were equally welcome. In fact, it was Nivedita who helped the Indian artistes connect with the Japanese and forge new links and interchange ideas between the Far East and India. She had a deep influence on young, budding artists like Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Ganguly and Asit Kumar Halder, all of whom would ultimately enrich the Bengal School and bring it world wide renown. Nandalal, for instance, copied the western-style Ravi Varma in his Mahashweta, but once he came under Nivedita's influence and perceived the inner beauty of Abanindranath's Buddha and Sujata he was changed for ever. He understood that Indian art was in a class by itself. "An Indian painting", Nivedita wrote in her essay on The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality" (1907) "if is to be really Indian and great, must appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way, must convey some idea, some feeling or idea that is either familiar or immediately comprehensible."

Nivedita was among the earliest in the world who tried to understand and explain to the world the unique character of the Ajanta caves and its unparalleled art. This exquisite wonder of Indian art was actually discovered accidentally by British soldiers on a hunt in 1819, after being totally lost for some four centuries, if not more. Its story took a long time after that to be grasped and be unravelled by historians, art experts, archaeologists, architects and geologists. It took even longer for it to be finally integrated into the mainstream of Indian history and Nivedita has a contribution here that few know of. Twenty seven years after its discovery, the Royal Asiatic Society commissioned Major Robert Gill, a trained painter, to make copies of the multi coloured frescoes on the walls of the caves. Gill devoted nearly 20 years till 1863 to make 27 large paintings of the murals in the caves but all of them were destroyed in 1866, during a fire at the Crystal Palace in London. A heartbroken Gill returned to Ajanta in 1875 for his second attempt at copying the beautiful paintings in the caves, but he died without much progress. Incidentally, Gill experimented with early photographic equipment in black and white and some of his photos are available for scholars. We need to note that the Royal Asiatic Society established a 'Bombay Cave Temple Commission' in 1848, mainly to clear the caves in that Presidency and to scientifically record the features.

In 1872, the Bombay Presidency commissioned John Griffiths and his students to make copies once again and after 13 years of labour, the team could produce 300 canvases. Many of these were displayed at the Imperial Institute in London that was the forerunner of the Victoria and Albert (V & A) Museum in 1885. Tragically another fire destroyed a hundred of these paintings and we rely on the 166 paintings that the V & A possesses for the earliest reproductions of what the Ajanta paintings looked like, before time, weather, water seepage, human neglect and faulty conservation took their toll on them. Besides, the cheap varnish used by the Griffiths team added to the deterioration of the originals. These treasures are not on public display nor did they have any great impact on Indian painters and paintings. For this, we need to move on, to the next stage when Lady Christina Herringham entered the scene between 1909 and 1911, with Nivedita's active assistance. She sent Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Halder to join the Herringham team and not only were they profoundly influenced by what they saw and copied but this set of reproductions bears, for the first time, the distinct stamp of the Indian ethos. This marks the turning point in the history of art in India, as the Ajanta paintings or those that had been painted in that style would be available to the public at large. This is where Nivedita and Herringham made all the difference where the fountain of india art, Ajanta, was concerned. Nandalal was grateful to Nivedita for cajoling him towards the indigenous spirit of Indian art and commented that "the thought of the progress of Indian artists always dwelt in her mind. I can never say enough about the encouragement I received from her. When she died, it was like being deprived of a guiding angel."

It was not only Nandalal alone who received Nivedita's encouragement, but all young artists who took up the Indian styles of Ajanta or the Mughal or the Rajput. Asit Halder, Sukhalata Rao and Samarendranath Gupta were also her dear artists. She was convinced that the Indian genius had been trampled upon by the British far too long and needed a real boost. She egged them on; she assisted and guided them; she chided them where necessary; she attended their exhibitions; she had their paintings given wide circulation by having therm published in Ramananda Chattopadhyay's Modern Review and Pravasi and she also wrote encouraging reviews to elevate their morale. That was Sister Nivedita. She did not damn western art, but she was convinced that Indian art was not to

be their clones as it had its own rich history. In fact, she wrote learned essays on Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael's as also on specific works of art by JF Millet, Puvis de Chavennes and other contemporary western painters. Even Aurobindo and Ramananda Chattopadhyay, who were ardent admirers of western art, finally came around to appreciate and encourage Indian art on Nivedita's constant and convincing persuasion. "The Indian people have been trained in Indian art conventions and cultured through Indian associations", she had insisted, "and it is worse than useless to desire to speak to them through the conventions and associations of Italy and Greece".

Her heart swelled with pride when she attended the last exhibition that she would ever see, in February 1910, a year before her death, for she saw so much creativity from so many. Other than Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore and Nandalal-Asit Halder, it had Surendranath Ganguly, Venkatappa, OC Ganguly, and Ishwari Prasad all together. She wrote that "we came away much gladdened, for never had the continuity of the new school with the old been so convincingly demonstrated." At the end of this journey many of us would agree with Asheshprana comments on Nivedita's contribution. She says "It would not be an exaggeration to say that her name will ever shine in the revival of ancient Indian art and four the birth of the Bengal School of art".