She gave her all to India
Sister Nivedita

Report of NIAS Wednesday Discussion held on 15 June 2016

Prof DP Sen Gupta, on 22 June 2016, spoke about the life and times of Sister Nivedita, her legacy and her influences on society and political movement of her time.

Early Life and Influences

Sister Nivedita was born in October 1867 as Margaret Elizabeth Noble, to Mary and Samuel Noble. She was a bright student; passed her school-final at seventeen and started teaching in Keswick England. At 19, she shifted to Wrexham to teach poor students in the mining area. She was engaged to a young engineer who fell ill and died. Margaret came back to Ireland to be with her mother.

In Ireland, during her time, the freedom movement against British rule was getting strong as British atrocities were increasing by the day. Margaret inherited her father’s religious nature and her grandfather’s patriotism. Brought up as a Christian and deeply interested in theology she started having doubts about certain basic concepts of Christianity and felt deeply depressed.

Swami Vivekananda & Sister Nivedita’s interest in India

She stumbled on the life and philosophy of Buddha and seemed to find answer to her doubts. It was then that
she came to hear about Swami Vivekananda’s exposition of the Vedanta in his 1893 lectures in Chicago. She went to attend Vivekananda’s talks and discussions in London in 1895. Though she was not fully convinced then, his talk in 1896 in London dispelled her doubts. The Swami’s words opened new vistas of thought and aspirations. To quote her: "This man who stood there held my life in the hollow of the hand and as he once in a while looked my way, I read his glance what I felt in my own heart complete faith and abiding comprehension of purpose—better than any feeling."

One day during a conversation Swami turned to her and said: “I have plans for women of my country in which you I think could be of great help to me.” It was then she knew that she had heard the call that would change her life. For years she had waited for some light to dispel the darkness that was obscuring her progress. Finally, Margaret came to India in January 1898. She met Ma Sarada on 17 March 1898. Ma accepted her with great affection. On 25 March she was initiated in Brahmacharya and given the name “Nivedita”

**Early Contribution**

Sister Nivedita started a school at her house on 13 November 1898 in Bagbazar. Her mode of teaching was very different from that in Brahmo girls’ and Bethune school and College. She had visited the United States with Swami Vivekananda to raise funds for her school. She lectured to various organizations. But then, she had marginal success.

In the school, she introduced morning breakfast to provide nourishment to the students. She struggled hard to meet her expenses.

When the plague struck Calcutta as an epidemic, Nivedita worked from morning till night to serve the patients. Cleaned the roads with a broomstick. Dr Radha Govinda Kar wrote: “Nivedita was seen in every slum of the Baghbazar locality. She helped with money without giving a thought to her own condition. At the time her own diet consisted only of milk and fruits. She gave up milk to meet the expenses of one patient.”
Swami Vivekananda was keen on setting up a math and gave much of his energy to the effort. He was convinced that spreading education and trying to achieve women’s emancipation were the main tasks that he could entrust to Nivedita. Following Swami Vivekananda’s demise on 4th of July 1902, she plunged into her work that the Swamy had spelt out for her.

Nivedita and the Indian Freedom Movement

Nivedita in an article showed how Lord Curzon in his book had admitted telling a lie to the Emperor of Korea while in a convocation address he said “truth was not valued in the East as it is in the West”. Curzon had to apologize in writing for his indiscretion. When Lord Curzon forced partition of Bengal in 1905, it flared up.

Brought up in the ambience of the Irish political movement Sister Nivedita could not subscribe to the political agenda of the Congress. She firmly believed...
that, “a country under foreign political domination cannot dream of regeneration whether social or economical cultural or spiritual. Political freedom is a condition precedent.” For her freedom from the British may not be obtained by appeasement.

Sister Nivedita supported the ‘Anushilan Samiti” and was believed to have informed Sri Aurobindo that there was an attempt to arrest him. She met him in Chandannagar after he had fled there by boat. She did not directly promote violence but possibly felt that that was the only way to curb British atrocities.

**Final Days**

Nivedita’s ceaseless efforts to establish her school, help scientists, artists and writers and being a part of the freedom movement on a near starvation budget for meal proved far too much. She burnt her candle at both ends to bring light to India, having transformed herself into an Indian. She went to Darjeeling to recover her health but it was a little late. She had hill Diarrhea and passed away in the arms of Abala Bose on 13 October 1911 at the age of 43.