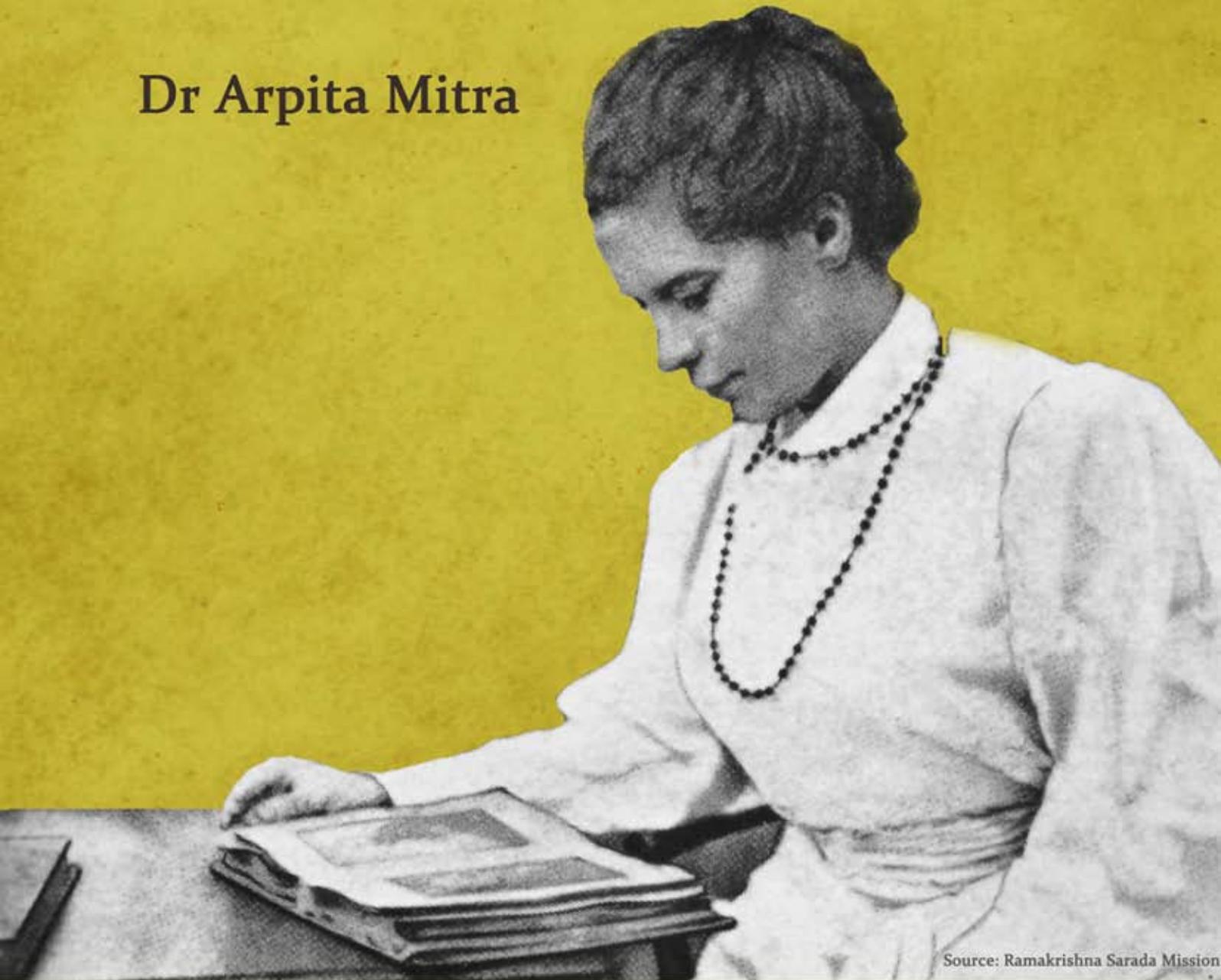




Vivekananda International Foundation

# Sister Nivedita's Ideas on Indian Nationhood and their Contemporary Relevance

Dr Arpita Mitra



Source: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission



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Vivekananda International Foundation  
3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021  
Tel: 011-24121764, Fax: 011-43115450  
E-mail: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org), Website: [www.vifindia.org](http://www.vifindia.org)

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## About the Author



**Dr. Arpita Mitra** has a doctoral degree in History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has been a Fellow (2015-2017) at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, where she has written a monograph on Swami Vivekananda's 'Neo-Vedanta'. Presently, she is Associate Fellow at the VIF, where she is working on different aspects of Indian history and culture.

*"We are a nation, as soon as we recognise ourselves as a nation."*

*~ Sister Nivedita*

*"...the love that Nivedita had for India was the truest of the true, not just a passing fancy. This love did not try to see the Indian scriptures validated in each action of the Indian people. Rather, it tried to penetrate all external layers to reach the innermost core of persons and to love that core. That is why she was not pained to see the extreme dereliction of India. All that was missing and inadequate in India simply aroused her love, not her censure or disrespect."*

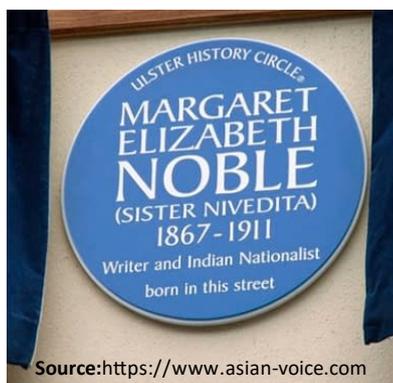
*~ Rabindranath Tagore*

## **Abstract**

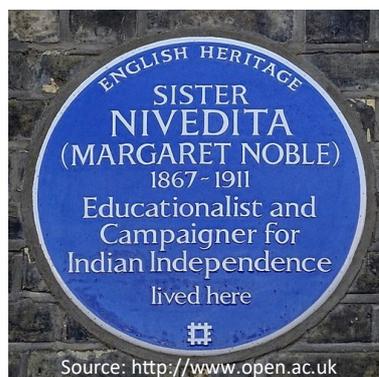
*'Nationalism' has recently been a bone of contention in the Indian public sphere. An argument that surfaces often is that the concept of the Indian nation is a product of the nationalist struggle for freedom, and therefore, otherwise there is no historical reality to an Indian nationhood prior to colonial rule. In present-day India, issues of identity and diversity are also of particular import. In this context, Sister Nivedita's ideas on Indian nationhood assume all the more importance. They shed light on many of the intricacies of the debate on Indian nationalism, like the idea of India, a pre-history of Indian nationhood, the dynamics between diversity and unity, and so on. Nivedita's conceptual contribution in this sphere has been largely ignored by the scholarly world. In the year of her 152<sup>nd</sup> birth anniversary, time is ripe to re-visit her ideas on Indian nationhood. It is also time to move beyond colonial legacies and think about a truly Indian narrative on 'nationalism' and the specificity of Indian nationhood, and to look at the phenomenon beyond its ideological dimensions, not restricting oneself to an exclusively political conceptualisation. Sister Nivedita's ideas point towards this direction.*

## Introduction

'Nationalism' has recently been a bone of contention in the Indian public sphere, where a conspicuous section of the Indian intelligentsia has either questioned the very idea itself or criticised what they understand to be a particular version of nationalism. There is an argument that appears in different avatars in the works of many well-known social scientists of our times—the argument that the concept of the Indian nation is a product of colonial rule and the consequent nationalist struggle for freedom, and therefore, otherwise there is no historical reality as such to an Indian nation prior to the commencement and consolidation of British rule. In making such a claim, this group of scholars, notwithstanding the degree of sophistication in their arguments, join the British rulers, who too claimed that India was a congeries of different races and not one nation. While present-day India battles crucial political conflicts based on identity in its North-Eastern States and in Kashmir and witnesses sharp identity-based ideological dissensions such as the case of Dravidian identity, the issue of nationalism assume great importance and it is crucial that we understand the conceptual and historical issues involved.



Memorial plaque at  
Sister Nivedita's birthplace



Memorial plaque where  
Sister Nivedita lived

This paper is an attempt to present and analyse the nationalist ideas of Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), one of the foremost disciples of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), and a key figure in the intellectual and political life of colonial Bengal in early twentieth century. The memorial plaque at her birthplace in Ireland describes her as a “writer and Indian nationalist”, and rightly so, as she was one of the greatest champions of the idea of Indian nationhood. Her ideas on the subject are not only incisive but particularly relevant in the context of many theoretical issues that plague us today. Given their relevance and given the fact that the year 2017 saw her 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary, it will be meaningful to re-visit her ideas on Indian nationhood at this juncture.

## The Problematic

Is India a ‘nation’? Is India *one* nation? Was there an ‘India’ before British rule created one? These are some of the questions that were the subject of much debate in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century India, where the interlocutors were Indian nationalists, on the one hand, and British imperial ideologues, on the other. When the British started ruling India, they invested resources in acquiring knowledge about India. Many were

struck by the sheer regional diversity of the land, and found it difficult to conceive of India as 'one nation'; hence, the idea of Indian nationhood was dismissed as mere 'moonshine'. Denying the reality and legitimacy of Indian nationhood also served their imperial interests. They liked to claim that they were the ones who gave India a sense of cohesion or unity by setting up the administrative machinery, railways, connecting different parts of the land, and so on. The nationalist Indian intellectuals, on the other hand, claimed that Indian nationhood was a reality. They emphasised on the pre-colonial civilisational and historical basis of Indian nationhood.

At the root of the debate on Indian nationhood is the very concept of the nation in the first place. There is a particular history to the rise of nations and nationalisms in the world. Therefore, any discussion on whether India constitutes a nation should not be done without taking into account conceptual and historical issues related to nationhood. On the other hand, if one argues that Indian nationhood is a construct, it would be difficult to demonstrate in what special way Indian nationhood alone is a construct while other nationalities are not.

In the case of defining what a nation is, key developments in the history of the West (e.g. development of print-capitalism,<sup>1</sup> emergence of the public sphere, modern transport networks) have been considered as determining factors. This conceptual approach completely ignores factors specific to Indian history, like the well-defined natural boundaries, the busy pilgrimage routes and destinations spread across the length and breadth of the country, the political empires of the pre-modern era, common civilisational factors like much-cherished values and philosophical and spiritual ideas—all have contributed to the creation of a collective consciousness even before the modern Western-style public sphere emerged in India during colonial rule. One can concede that this consciousness was not 'national' strictly speaking; but it would be difficult to deny that there was already a kind of collective consciousness present in Indian society that served as a substratum for the development of later civic national consciousness. As pointed out by Sugata Bose recently—"Modern Indian nationalism, far from being exclusively derived from European discourses, drew significantly on rich legacies of precolonial patriotism and kept it alive through a constant process of creative innovation."<sup>2</sup>

Sister Nivedita is undoubtedly an important thinker in this context. The present paper proposes to examine her ideas related to Indian nationhood and their contemporary relevance.

## **Survey of Literature**

There is relatively less academic work on Nivedita specifically, but there is a substantial body of literature on the discourse of Indian nationhood during colonial times. I shall first discuss the literature pertaining to Nivedita and then do a representative survey of the general literature.

In her book on cross-cultural nationalists, Elleke Boehmer mainly discusses the interaction between Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose.<sup>3</sup> All she mentions about Nivedita's ideas on Indian nationhood is a summary of Nivedita's key position: "The nation's unity and spiritual strength were 'self-born', and its future, concomitantly, should

be 'self-determined, self-wrought': 'the one central fact is the realisation of its own nationality by the [Indian] Nation'.<sup>4</sup> There is no further deliberation on these ideas by Boehmer.

Amiya P. Sen has recently edited a selection of Nivedita's writings.<sup>5</sup> In the Introduction to the volume, Sen takes note of Nivedita's "persistent desire to disseminate the idea of a common nationality among Indians, to get them to believe in a common goal and a common destiny."<sup>6</sup> According to him, however: "On several occasions..., her speeches and writings naively overlook or brush aside internal divisions or differences, and are clearly dismissive of the fact that in India, anti-colonial sentiments did indeed, produce a discursive nationalism that was not really backed by the shared sense of a common nationhood. Nivedita deliberately underplayed the linguistic, cultural or political differences that were progressively escalating in contemporary India; on the other hand, she took such idealistic projections to be potentially real."<sup>7</sup>

As we shall see in the discussion in subsequent sections, Sen's arguments are not justified. Sister Nivedita was well aware of the differences in India, but she argued that India was a nation not despite the internal differences, but precisely because of these differences (a nation is a *complex* unity). Secondly, it is wrong to claim that the discursive nationalism produced in India by anti-colonial sentiments "was not really backed by the shared sense of a common nationhood". Nivedita argued with evidence that the three pillars of nationality—"common home, common interest and common love"—have existed in India through centuries. However, one would be mistaken to look for elements that fit into a Western conceptual framework (which our postcolonial scholars continue to do).

Sen further writes: "...there is a utopian sentiment that pervades all her thoughts and writings, a utopia that rested on a passionate, if at times, also sentimental and uncritical attachment to India and Indians. What in contemporary parlance has come to be accepted as the 'idea' of India, might well have originated with Nivedita, but with certain trappings of superficiality."<sup>8</sup> Sen, however, does not discuss his reasons for considering her 'idea' of India as imbued with "certain trappings of superficiality". One would like to argue that Nivedita was indeed and undoubtedly an idealist, but idealism is the basis of *all* nationalist thought. Without a degree of idealism, people would be self-centered and incapable of any kind of higher orientation. Furthermore, Nivedita's idea of India was not superficial, it was grounded in well-studied observations, some of which will be discussed below.

Now, we move on to a more general historiography of ideas of Indian nationhood. As is evident from the title of his article, 'The Imaginary Institution of India', Sudipta Kaviraj is of the following opinion: "India, the objective reality of today's history, whose objectivity is tangible for people to preserve, to destroy, to uphold, to construct and dismember, the reality taken for granted in all attempts in favour and against, is not an object of discovery but of invention. It was historically instituted by the nationalist imagination of the nineteenth century."<sup>9</sup>

In a recent publication, B. D. Chattopadhyaya discusses the issue of India's 'unity in diversity'. He analyses ancient sources in the light of questions such as: "what the meaning of 'unity' in the expression is, or what its limits are, implied by its juxtaposition with 'diversity'. In other words, if diversities are taken to constitute 'unity', at what stage do

‘diversities’ remain when the reference is to ‘unity’?’<sup>10</sup> These are some of the questions the present paper explores with reference to Sister Nivedita’s nationalist ideas as well, as they are closely related to the ideal of ‘unity in diversity’. Chattopadhyaya rightly notes that R. K. Mookerji’s *The Fundamental Unity of India* (1914) is one of the earliest historical statements of the idea of Indian unity. It should be noted that this book was a direct result of Mookerji’s interactions with Sister Nivedita.

Sugata Bose’s recent book on Indian nationalism<sup>11</sup> deals with the subject starting from 1917 onwards, as that is the publication year of Rabindranath Tagore’s famous book *Nationalism* consisting of three essays, one of which is on nationalism in India. Since Bose’s book takes off from the period 1917, he hardly discusses Nivedita. As is well-known, Tagore was a critic of the ‘cult’ of nationalism, and was more of an advocate of universal humanism. Nivedita had passed away by the time Tagore’s book was published, and as is already known, although Tagore and Nivedita appreciated each other, their relationship was not free from undercurrents of intellectual conflicts.

The general drift of the literature is evident: a) It questions the existence of any entity that can be called an ‘Indian’ or a ‘national’ entity prior to colonial rule; b) based on the fact of diversity, it asks if India can be called *one* entity; c) taking a) and b) together, this discourse subtly questions the legitimacy of an Indian nationalism and Indian nationhood. None of these works discuss Nivedita’s nationalist ideas, which can open up new and rich debates on Indian nationalism.

## **Research Questions**

These are some of the questions that the present paper will address:-

- What were Sister Nivedita’s views on the unique basis of Indian nationhood?
- How did Nivedita conceptualise the common grounds of Indian nationality?
- How did Nivedita conceptualise unity in diversity in the Indian context?
- How are Indian geography and history related to the formation of Indian national identity?
- What were the views of Nivedita’s contemporaries on Indian nationhood?

## **Methodology and Sources**

This is a work in the history of ideas. The principal sources consulted are original writings of Sister Nivedita and her contemporaries. Nivedita’s writings which have been cited here were mostly written between 1909 and 1911. Writings of Aurobindo Ghose (later Sri Aurobindo) and Ananda Coomaraswamy cited here were also written around the same time—1907 and 1909 respectively. Swami Prajnananda’s writings came out around 1913 and Tagore’s ‘Nationalism in India’ lecture was written in 1916 and published in 1917.

## **Defining Nationhood**

This section will deal with the concept of nation and nationalisms and also discuss briefly the history of rise of nations and nationalism in the world.

### **The Rise of Nationalism**

The twentieth century saw the rise of nationalism as one of the most potent forces in the world. (The twenty-first century has, on the other hand, seen a lot of assertion of ethnic identity, religious identity, linguistic identity and so on.) Nationalism was one of the key factors in the American and French Revolutions: “Many historians would agree that, as an ideology and discourse, nationalism became prevalent in North America and Western Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and shortly thereafter in Latin America. The dates that are often singled out as signaling the advent of nationalism include 1775 (the First Partition of Poland), 1776 (the American Declaration of Independence), 1789 and 1792 (the commencement and second phase of the French Revolution), and 1807 (Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation*).”<sup>12</sup> After 1792, the patriotic ideals of the French Revolution were exported all over Europe.

The territorial and economic basis of nation-states in Europe was already prepared by the late fifteenth century due to the rise of absolutist states and the failure to reunite Europe on the model of the Roman Empire: “The disentangling of ‘England’ from ‘France’ at the end of the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), and the rise of separate ethnically based states in Spain, Switzerland, Holland, Sweden, and Poland by the sixteenth century, broke the unity of Christendom even before the Wars of Religion and the Counter-Reformation, and forged an interstate system based on a complex web of alliance and balances of power.”<sup>13</sup> To this was added commercial competition and wars between the states.

While the earliest nation-states were European, nationalism emerged elsewhere as well and became a truly global phenomenon. Thus, the world witnessed for instance, the rise of Japan as a nation, following the Meiji Restoration of 1868; Arab nationalisms in the Middle East and North Africa; anti-colonial nationalisms in India and Africa, and so on.

### **Features of Nationalism**

As discussed by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith: “Nationalism was, first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated—that is, free from any external constraint; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their own house; they must control their own resources; they must obey only their own ‘inner’ voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture. But which culture and what territory? Only a homeland that was ‘theirs’ by historic right, the land of their forbears; only a culture that was ‘theirs’ as a heritage, passed down the generations, and therefore an expression of their authentic identity. *Autonomy, unity, identity*: these three themes and ideals have been pursued by nationalists everywhere since Rousseau, Herder, Fichte, Korias, and Mazzini popularised them in Western and Central Europe.”<sup>14</sup> The French Revolution model is quite evident, albeit garbed in different wordings.

## **Sources of European Nationalism**

European nationalism had its own antecedents. Millennial Christianity, the printing press, newspapers, an emphasis on civic virtue drawn from ancient Greek and Roman models like the patriotism of the *polis*—all contributed to the creation of the nationalist ideology in Europe. There were clearly theological influences as there were influences like “the doctrine of ethnic election which, originating perhaps with the ancient Israelites, became widely diffused in the Middle East, Europe, and East Africa...”<sup>15</sup> It is thus evident that European nations were not self-given entities, but products of long-drawn historical processes and influences of diverse kinds. Since the European nations properly speaking emerged only in the modern era, these were also young nations.

## **Kinds of Nationalism**

Hans Kohn has differentiated between what he calls the organic ‘Eastern’ forms of nationalism, in contrast to the civic and rational ‘Western’ forms of nationalism prevalent in France, England, the United States and so on.<sup>16</sup> Hutchinson and Smith refer to fusions and tensions when it comes to nationalisms in India and Africa: “On the one hand, a civic, territorial, anti-colonial nationalism, and, on the other hand, various ethnic and pan cultural movements...” They note: “The forms that nationalism takes have been kaleidoscopic: religious, conservative, liberal, fascist, communist, cultural, political, protectionist, integrationist, separatist, irredentist, diaspora, pan, etc.”<sup>17</sup> An important question is whether nationalism is more cultural than political. They admit that one of the central difficulties in studying nations and nationalism has been definitional:—“the problem of finding adequate and agreed definitions of the key concepts, nation and nationalism.” Clearly, there is no one model for nation or nationalism.

## **Concept of Nation**

How is the concept of nation different from other forms of collective identity? “While it is recognised that the concept of the nation must be differentiated from other concepts of collective identity like class, region, gender, race, and religious community, there is little agreement about the role of ethnic, as opposed to political, components of the nation; or about the balance between ‘subjective’ elements like will and memory, and more ‘objective’ elements like territory and language; or about the nature and role of ethnicity in national identity.”<sup>18</sup> As we shall see in the subsequent sections, Indian intellectuals of early twentieth century too had a lot to articulate about concepts like nations and nationalisms.

## **The Indian Context during Nivedita's Time**

Sister Nivedita, née Margaret Elizabeth Noble, had met Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895, and the following year, she accepted Vedanta as her own ideal and Vivekananda as her spiritual master. Soon, she decided to take up the cause of serving India and arrived in Calcutta in January 1898. By this time, the rule of the British Raj was well-consolidated in India. Having absorbed the shock of the Revolt of 1857, the imperial government had made deep inroads into Indian society. The English education system that was introduced in the country, largely replacing the traditional system in India, did produce “clerks” as intended by its author Macaulay. But an unintended consequence of this system



Source: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission  
Swami Vivekananda with his Western disciples, Josephine MacLeod, Mrs. Sara Bull and Sister Nivedita (left to right)

was also the emergence of a group of educated Indians who had started questioning the supposed benevolence of the imperial masters, especially from the point of view of economic exploitation. Peasant unrest in the country was a natural outcome of land reforms and agrarian policies under the British. One of the glaring manifestations of economic exploitation was large-scale occurrence of famine (in fact, Nivedita wrote on the sociology of famine as well).

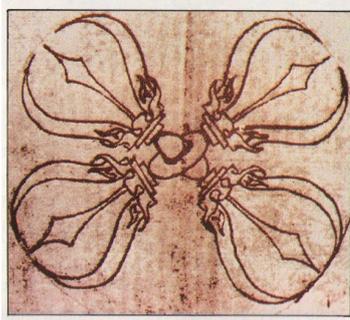
The Indian National Congress (INC) was founded in 1885 in order to articulate the grievances of educated Indians against government policies. In course of time, there emerged a more radical section within the Congress who were dissatisfied with the petition culture of the Congress and were willing to undertake a more high-pitched struggle against the British. So, in 1898, when Nivedita arrived, Calcutta, the then capital, was the hotbed of politics and the rising tide of nationalism. However, as discussed earlier, the critics of Indian nationalist aspirations had an arrow in their quiver—the claim that Indian nationhood itself was the result of British rule, that a land as diverse as India could hardly be conceived as one nation, and therefore, the nationalist aspirations of Indians were not legitimate. Sister Nivedita's involvement in Indian nationalism is usually represented in academic works as an involvement in nationalist politics. However, as it will be evident from the ensuing paragraphs, Nivedita also emerged as a major theorist of Indian nationality. Her contribution to the discourse of Indian nationhood has been practically ignored by mainstream academia, despite the fact that she engaged with this issue in great depth and breadth.

## **Nivedita's Contribution to Indian Nationalism**

Sister Nivedita was indeed deeply involved in the Indian national movement. She was on good terms with INC leaders, cutting across political differences—for instance, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who believed in legislation as a tool against the British, on the one hand, and Aurobindo Ghose, who appealed for a more radical version of freedom for India, on the other hand. In fact, she was against any kind of split in the Congress (which finally happened in 1907), as she believed that unity was the need of the hour. She had especially close ties with Ghose. Soon, she was under British surveillance and narrowly escaped imprisonment.

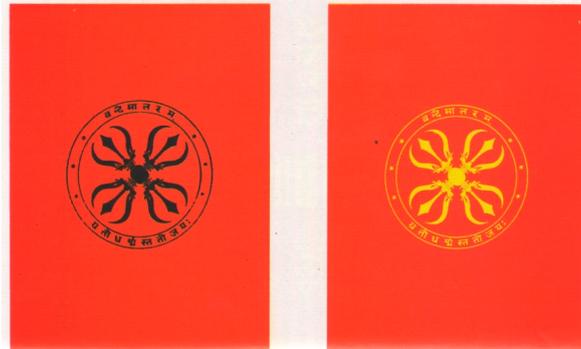
In her writings and speeches, Nivedita exhorted Indians to develop a sense of civic nationalism—the idea that the nation was higher than the family. She was a prolific writer, who wrote on a variety of subjects ranging from famine in India to the role of art in shaping nationality. She contributed regularly to Ramananda Chatterjee's journal *Modern Review*. In 1910, when Aurobindo left for Pondicherry, at his request, Nivedita took charge of his paper *Karma Yogin* for a few months. She lectured at several places like Calcutta, Patna, Lucknow, Baroda, Nagpur, Wardha, Amaravati, Madras and so on. She has left behind five volumes of her complete works that include books, essays, lectures, reviews etc. and two volumes of letters written to different people. An educationist by vocation, and a nationalist at heart, Nivedita was actively involved in the 'National Education' movement, pioneered

by the Dawn Society under the leadership of Satish Chandra Mukherjee. In the short 13 years that Sister Nivedita spent in India, she led an active public life, dividing her time between writing, lecturing and serving India through plague relief programmes and running a girls' school.



Source: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission

Vajra or Thunderbolt designed by Sister Nivedita



Source: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission

Indian national flag with vajra as designed by Sister Nivedita

A major work of service that Nivedita undertook in India was the care of plague victims. March 1899 saw a major outbreak of plague in Calcutta. She nursed plague victims even risking her own life. She also wrote appeals for plague relief funds in newspapers, initiated Plague Relief Work in Calcutta slums, gave lectures on plague and appealed to the Indian youth to sacrifice their comforts and come forward for the cause.

Following Vivekananda, Nivedita understood that the hope for India lay in the education and empowerment of women. On 12 November 1898, Nivedita convened a meeting to discuss the proposal for opening a girls' school. The next day, this "School for Girls" was inaugurated and blessed by Sri Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual consort, at Nivedita's residence, 16 Bosepara Lane, Baghbazar in Calcutta. Three little girls were the first students. Nivedita had a total capital of eight hundred rupees, gifted by the Maharaja of Kashmir. Being a *brahmacharini*, she had little resources of her own. In spite of that, she



Source: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission

The house where Sister Nivedita lived in Calcutta (before recent renovation)

managed to provide even clothes and medical treatment to some of the students. It was not easy to get students for the school, as the then Hindu social customs were very rigid. Nivedita, however, went from door to door pleading to parents to send their daughters to her school. This school has grown into the present-day Sister Nivedita Girls' School in Baghbazar. According to Nivedita, an active involvement in the cause of the nation is vital for women's own regeneration: "To work, to suffer, and to love, in the

highest spheres; to transcend limits; to be sensitive to great causes; to stand transfigured by the national righteousness; this is the true emancipation of woman, and this is the key to her efficient education."<sup>19</sup>

An area where Sister made her invaluable contribution was the promotion of science in India. Vivekananda had heard Jagadish Chandra Bose's presentations in Paris in 1900. He got one of his disciples, Mrs. Sara Chapman Bull to help Bose patent his discoveries. Nivedita met J C Bose in 1898. Later, she was to become a life-long friend of Jagadish Chandra and his wife Lady Abala Bose. British officials conspired to suppress Bose's scientific work. Nivedita tried to protect his interests and promote his work. She provided much-needed succor to Bose. She also assisted him greatly in the writing of many scientific books.

The present-day Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru is the result of a chance meeting between Vivekananda and Jamsetji Tata. They were aboard the same ship from Japan to America in 1893. Jamsetji was deeply impressed by Vivekananda's emphasis on the development of science and technology in India. Thus, in 1898, he offered to fund the setting up of a Post-Graduate Research Institute for scientific education and training. The British tried to foil these efforts. Lord Curzon was especially vocal in speaking against the feasibility of "Mr. Tata's Scheme". Nivedita spoke and wrote in favour of the scheme, met officials, and tried to garner support for the cause. The proposed institute eventually started functioning in 1911.

Nivedita interacted with all the great Indian stalwarts of the time and also influenced some of their ideas. She inspired Dinesh Chandra Sen to write his classic book on the history of Bengali language and literature. She equally inspired the cohort of young historians like Radha Kumud Mukherjee and Jadunath Sarkar to think and write about Indian history from an Indian perspective. She was a close friend of the veteran Romesh Chunder Dutt, whose writings on Indian history she found valuable for their perspective (she wrote a moving obituary for him). She supported the new Bengal School of Art movement, spearheaded by Abanindranath Tagore. She wrote essays on the national ideals of art in India; collaborated with Ananda Coomaraswamy, the leading philosopher and historian of art of that time; mentored young artists like Nandalal Bose and Asit Halder and sent them to Ajanta and Ellora to discover the roots of Indian art. After her passing away, Rabindranath Tagore gave her the epithet '*lokmata*' (mother of the people).

## **Nivedita on Indian Nationhood**

### **The Basis of Indian Nationality**

In the context of emergent Indian nationalism, Nivedita's appeal to Indians was: "The duty of all who understand the Indian situation today, then, is to *realise* those eternal verities on which the cry for nationality is based."<sup>20</sup> According to her, this basis is both historical and social. She remarked: "It is a mistake to think that India has not in the past been a well-organised nation. Ashoka, two and a half centuries before Christ, Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya, four centuries after Christ, and Akbar and his immediate successors, have all been men who understood the idea of Indian Nationality, and loved and worked for it."<sup>21</sup> It could therefore be argued that although the Western concept of nationhood was a modern phenomenon, pre-modern notions of a politico-territorial unit that was more or less the predecessor of the modern nation was already operative in India historically at various points of time. Nivedita could clearly see that all the "smaller unities of the past" had prepared India for becoming a single giant national entity.

Secondly, as Nivedita pointed out, “Nationality is built on the common home, the common interest and common love”.<sup>22</sup> There was a fund of ideas and ideals that were cherished by the inhabitants of the land across differences of creed, beliefs, regional characteristics and so on. She elaborated: “There is a self-organisation of thought that precedes external organisation, and [this brings about] the accumulation of characteristics in a single line...In India, the distinctive stock of ideas rises out of her early pre-occupation with great truths. Neither Jain nor Mohammedan admits the authority of the Vedas or the Upanishads, but both are affected by the culture derived from them. Both are marked, as strongly as the Hindu, by a high development of domestic affection, by a delicate range of social observation and criticism and by the conscious admission that the whole of life is to be subordinated to the ethical struggle between inclination and conscience...When Egypt was building her Pyramids, India was putting a parallel energy into the memorising of the Vedas, and the patient elaboration of the Philosophy of the Upanishads. The culture began so early, has proceeded to the present day without a break, holding its own ground and saturating Indian society with standards of thought and feeling, far in advance of those common in other countries.”<sup>23</sup>

She then went on to elaborate on other social markers of Indian unity such as devotion to the family, and especially to the mother, the organic part played by the aged, and so on, demonstrating how ‘Indian’ mores are similar notwithstanding religious differences between the Hindus and the Mohammedans. In terms of more abstract values, she noted that “The old-time Dharma of the great sovereigns, the code of piety of kings of the Shanti Parva, represents the most beautiful product and expression of a nation’s unity that the world has ever seen.”<sup>24</sup>

## **Past and Place**

The cry for nationality stands on two pillars—history and geography. Nivedita argued that both these factors provide ample basis for the constitution of Indian nationality. The role of history in shaping any nationality is undeniable: “...History is the warp upon which is to be woven the woof of Nationality.”<sup>25</sup> Nivedita rightly pointed out—in her quintessential way—the part played by India’s past in consolidating Indian nationality: “The work of Humanity is never lost. The nation that has been developing its civilisation during more than thirty centuries of sustained effort cannot fail to have won something not yet attained by those who have emerged within a thousand years from barbarism. That nation fears no ordeal. Is the struggle before it today, the first it has known? True, it is the struggle of a unification vaster and deeper than the past has dreamt of. But it is a unification for which the past has prepared it.”<sup>26</sup>

She was acutely aware of the pitfalls of the history of India that was to be found in books during her times. Apart from the motivation of imperial interests that wanted India to forever remain a subject nation, it was also a question of unbridgeable differences in outlook and culture that informed the historiography on India of her days. She noted: “European scholars are blind and deaf to many of the problems and many of the lines of work that Indian history opens up in abundance.”<sup>27</sup> History was the very site of contestation of power between the ruler and the ruled, the site of representation and identity formation. Nivedita insisted: “...there is nothing like knowledge of facts for dispelling fictitious self-hypnotisms. For this reason, a really valuable History of India presupposes a certain training

in sociology. When definite knowledge is available, partisanship falls gradually into disuse. It is better, surely, to *understand* caste, than either to praise or to vilify it.”<sup>28</sup>

Nivedita clearly stated that it was more important to understand than to defend or vilify, that is, an objective non-partisan approach is desirable over a prejudiced one. However, with her, objectivity of viewpoint did not mean dryness of approach. Without an intense engagement with the subject of study, no authentic scholarship is possible. On the other hand, this passion should not blindfold one to the demands of rigorous scholarship. Thus, she pointed out: “The tale of her own past that the Motherland awaits, must combine the critical acumen of the modern, with the epic enthusiasm of the ancient writer...It must not only be critical, but also fiery, proud, constructive.”<sup>29</sup>

The second important factor in the formation of nationhood is geography. Nivedita noted that India undeniably possesses to an extraordinary degree the first treasure of a nation—“geographical distinctness”. Speaking about the fundamental laws of nation-birth, she pointed out: “Any country which is geographically distinct, has the power to become the cradle of a nationality. National unity is dependent upon place... Complexity of elements, when duly subordinated to the nationalising influence of place, is a source of strength, and not weakness to a nation.”<sup>30</sup> Nivedita was strongly influenced by the works of the Scottish town-planner and sociologist Sir Patrick Geddes, with whom she had even worked closely for some time. Geddes was in turn influenced by the French school of geography and sociology that accorded great importance to place in the making of human cultures. This influence is clearly noticed in Nivedita’s remark: “...miracles of human unification are the work of *Place*. Man only begins by making his home. His home ends by remaking him.”<sup>31</sup> In some of her other writings, she explained how place can influence history—as in the case of the desert people of Arabia or the fisher-pirates of the European coastline who catapulted to the stature of being the creators of empires by the sheer force of necessity as determined by the place of their habitation.

### **Unity and Diversity**

“Today being the 30<sup>th</sup> Aswin, 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1905, Partition of the Bengali people is to be made by law. This day then, designed to be the date of our division, is henceforth yearly to be set aside by us, for the deeper realisation of our national unity. Having been made by this threat of division, overwhelmingly conscious of the essential oneness of the whole Indian Nation the heart of Bengal goes out to all parts of our common Motherland. Thus to you from us of Bengal, is sent today this thread of Rakhi-Bandhan, in token not merely of the union of Provinces and parts of Provinces but of bond that knits us all as children of one Motherland together. Bande Mataram.”<sup>32</sup> Thus wrote Nivedita to Ramananda Chatterjee.<sup>33</sup>

The British left behind the curious legacy of both uniting and dividing the country politically. The process of political unification was an unintended consequence of British rule and was of course meant to serve their own expansionist interests. But they always claimed credit for this and refused to acknowledge that India was an organic unity in itself. Nivedita told Indians: “‘India is One’ is the formula of nationhood for her. A mantra means a great deal when it has *realisation* behind it, though without this, it is not even as good as a

juggler's spell.”<sup>34</sup> She could highlight the subtle dimensions related to the concept of national unity. Let us examine the issues one by one.

Firstly, it was claimed that India was divided along the lines of caste and creed and could not aspire for a common nationality. About communal tension—which was steadily on the rise towards the end of her lifetime—she exhorted Indians to see it in proper perspective and not exaggerate its implications for national cohesion. In any body politic, some amount of tension and friction is natural and does not call to question the unity of the national fabric. She thus remarked: “What? Is a village riot so serious a symptom in the body politic? The child stole sour mangoes, as his mother worked over the cooking fire, but it is not therefore proved that the child has all the instincts of a thief! Courage, my friends, courage. Let trifles take on their true proportions. Turn we to reckoning our wealth instead of our poverty!”<sup>35</sup> This, however, should not be treated as an underestimation of the communal problem. She was rightly aware of it and tried her best to resolve these tensions and bring Indians together for a nationality that synthesised differences. She was very clear about her idea of future India as a civic national entity—a ‘synthesis’ of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and even British cultures, while upholding what is truly ‘Indian’. Then, came caste differences. In her quintessential way, Nivedita pointed out: “Is India disunited? She has so many castes! says one. And how could she ever be a nation, if she had not? Her castes are not her enemies. They are her children...”<sup>36</sup> She, in fact, saw differences as contributing to unity and not causing division.

She wrote extensively on the factors that have laid the basis of national unity. Pilgrimage circuits and trade routes that have been active in India since very early times, joining the north and the south, have contributed to Indian unity. So much so that the revered *char dhams* of Puri, Badrinath, Dwarka and Rameswaram dot the four corners of the landmass thereby demonstrating their inextricable relationship with the historical geography of the land. Even the epics have served to unite India, despite the variations that have occurred in them across the length and breadth of the country. The epics are also testimony to the connectedness of the geographical landscape of the land. The pre-modern political empires, the ideals of the land—all have contributed to its unity. Even the common struggle against the British had been a basis of national unity.

Nivedita made a significant conceptual contribution by pointing out that a nation is a “complex unity” and rightly asked, “How shall there be a Nation without differences of social degree?”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, we need to rethink the concepts of unity and diversity and their relationship with each other. Unity and diversity are really two sides of the same coin. They are related concepts, one cannot exist without the other. If we did not have diversity, the concept of unity would be rendered meaningless. Secondly, unity does not mean homogeneity. The question of unity arises precisely where there is heterogeneity or diversity. Nivedita pointed out insightfully: “Many persons use the word unity in a way that would seem to imply that the unity of a lobster, with its monotonous repetition of segments and limbs, was more perfect than that of the human body, which is not even alike on its right and left sides.”<sup>38</sup> And then she recounted an incident: “I cannot forget a French working man,... who came up to me some years ago, in a university-settlement in the West, and said, ‘Have the people of India any further proof to offer of the oneness of Humanity, beyond the fact that if I hurt you I hurt myself, and the other fact that no two of us are exactly alike?’ And then, seeing perhaps a look of surprise, he added thoughtfully, ‘for the fact that we are

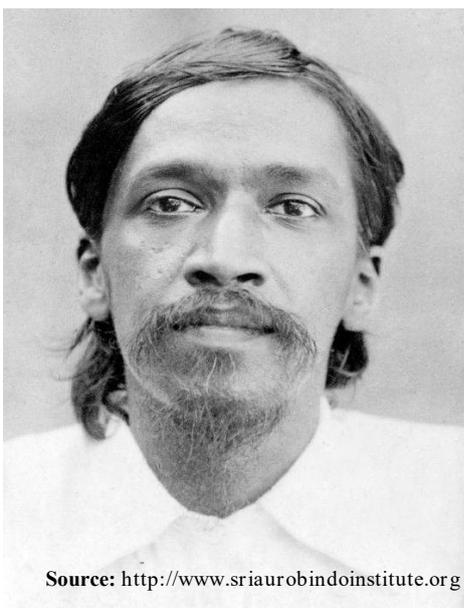
all different is, in its way, a proof of our unity!”<sup>39</sup> In this connection it may also be noted that she herself found “an overwhelming aspect of Indian unity in the fact that no single member or province repeats the function of any other.”<sup>40</sup> They were all meant to be different in order to form a true unity.

Finally, Nivedita's idea of unity in the Indian context was that of 'synthesis'. Thus she remarked: “...India is and always has been a synthesis. No amount of analysis—racial, lingual, or territorial—will ever amount in the sum to the study of India...Perhaps all the parts of a whole are not equal to the whole.”<sup>41</sup> The idea is that the whole is not merely a sum of the parts; the whole has an identity of its own which is distinct from merely a mechanical addition of the parts. Similarly, when one talks of India, one does not consider it to be a mechanical adding up of regions. As once again pointed out by Nivedita: “...apart from and above, all the fragments which must be added together to make India, we have to recognise India herself, all-containing, all-dominating, moulding and shaping the destinies and the very nature of the elements out of which she is composed. 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. No Indian province has lived unto itself, pursuing its own development, following its own path, going its way unchallenged and alone. On the contrary, the same tides have swept the land from end to end.”<sup>42</sup>

## **Nivedita's Contemporaries on Indian Nationhood**

### **The Basis of Nationality**

Some of Nivedita's contemporaries like Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950, later Sri Aurobindo) and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) echoed some of her ideas on Indian nationhood. In 1907, Ghose wrote that the notion that the essential conditions of a nationality are unity of language, religion and race is a false notion. Hence, the argument that is put forward on this basis that India is no nation, is also a false argument. He wrote: “...because there is diversity of race, religion and language in India [one] thinks that there is



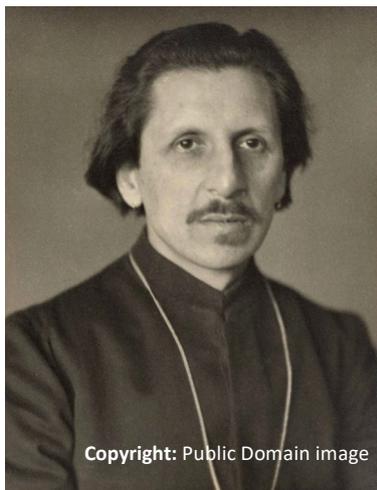
Source: <http://www.sriurobindoinstitute.org>

Aurobindo Ghose in Presidency Jail during the Alipore Bomb Trial Case

no possibility of creating a nationality in this country. This is a very common stumbling-block, but is there any reality in it? Rather we find that every nationality has been formed not because of, but in spite of, diversity of race or religion or language, and not unoften in spite of the co-existence of all these diversities.”<sup>43</sup> Ghose then discussed the case of the English nation that was built out of various races, and in which, till his day, the races which came later into the British nationality keep their distinct individuality, including their language. Then he cited the “striking example of Switzerland where distinct racial strains speaking three different languages and, later, professing different religions coalesced into and persisted as one nation without sacrificing a single one of these diversities.”<sup>44</sup> Ghose continued: “In France three different languages are spoken, in America the candidates for the White House address the nation in

fourteen languages, Austria is a congeries of races and languages, the divisions in Russia are hardly less acute. That unity in race, religion or language is essential to nationality is an idea which will not bear examination. Such elements of unity are very helpful to the growth of a nationality, but they are not essential and will not even of themselves assure its growth. The Roman Empire though it created a common language, a common religion and life, and did its best to crush out racial diversities under the heavy weight of its uniform system failed to make one great nation.”<sup>45</sup>

Then, Ghose posed the question from the other end: “If these are not essential elements of nationality, what, it may be asked, are the essential elements? We answer that there are certain essential conditions, geographical unity, a common past, a powerful common interest impelling towards unity and certain favourable political conditions which enable the impulse to realise itself in an organised government expressing the nationality and perpetuating its single and united existence. This may be provided by a part of the nation, a race or community, uniting the others under its leadership or domination, or by a united resistance to a common pressure from outside or within. A common enthusiasm coalescing with a common interest is the most powerful fosterer of nationality. We believe that the necessary elements are present in India, we believe that the time has come and that by a common resistance to a common pressure in the shape of the [Swadeshi] boycott, inspired by a common enthusiasm and ideal, that united nationality for which the whole history of India has been a preparation, will be speedily and mightily accomplished.”<sup>46</sup>



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Ananda Coomaraswamy

Coomaraswamy too reiterated more or less the same points as Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose. He wrote: “What are the things which make possible national self-consciousness, which constitute nationality? Certainly a unity of some sort is essential. There are certain kinds of unity, however, which are not essential, and others which are insufficient. Racial unity, for example, does not constitute the Negroes of North America a nation. Racial unity is not even an essential; the British nation is perhaps more composed of diverse racial elements than any other, but it has none the less a strong national consciousness. To take another example, many of the most Irish of the Irish are of English origin...Neither is a common and distinctive language an essential; Switzerland is divided among three languages, and Ireland between two.

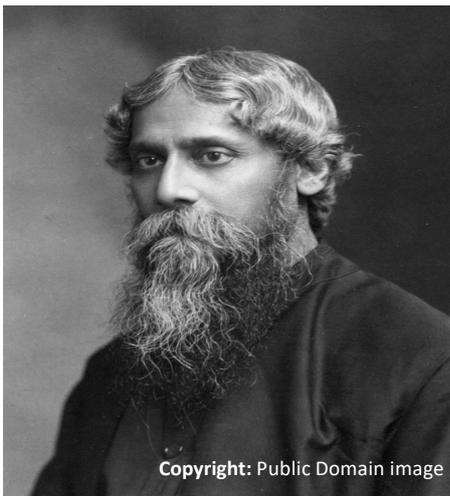
Two essentials of nationality there are,—a geographical unity, and a common historic evolution or culture. These two India possesses superabundantly, beside many lesser unities which strengthen the historical tradition. The fact of India’s geographical unity is apparent on the map, and is never, I think, disputed. The recognition of social unity is at least as evident to the student of Indian culture.

The idea has been grasped more than once by individual rulers,—Asoka, Vikramaditya and Akbar. It was recognised before the Mahābhārata was written; when Yudhishtira performed the *Rājasuya* sacrifice on the occasion of his inauguration as sovereign, a great assembly...was held, and to this assembly came Bhīma, Dhritarashtra and his hundred sons, Subala (King of Gandhāra), etc....and others from the extreme south and

north (Dravida, Ceylon and Kashmīr)...No one can say that any such idea as that of a Federated States of India is altogether foreign to the Indian mind. But more than all this, there is evidence enough that the founders of Indian culture and civilisation and religion ... had this unity in view...Is it for nothing that India's sacred shrines are many and far apart; that one who would visit more than one or two of these must pass over hundreds of miles of Indian soil?...Or take the epics, the foundation of Indian education and culture; or a poem like the *Megha Duta*, the best known and most read work of *Kalidasa*. Are not these expressive of love for and knowledge of the Motherland? The 'holy land' of the Indian is not a far-off Palestine but the Indian land itself.

The whole of Indian culture is so pervaded with this idea of India as THE LAND, that it has never been necessary to insist upon it overmuch, for no one could have supposed it otherwise.”<sup>47</sup>

In the same vein as Sister Nivedita, Coomaraswamy too pointed out: “The diverse peoples of India are like the parts of some magic puzzle, seemingly impossible to fit together, but falling easily into place when once the key is known; and the key is that realisation of the fact that the parts do fit together, which we call national self-consciousness.”<sup>48</sup>



Rabindranath Tagore

In about a decade, a powerful critique of nationalism came from none other than Rabindranath Tagore. He articulated this critique not only through his novels like *Gora*<sup>49</sup> and *Ghare Baire* but also a series of lectures that were published in the form of a book called *Nationalism* in 1917. Tagore's main objection to the cult of nationalism was this: “Our real problem in India is not political. It is social... Politics in the West have dominated Western ideals, and we in India are trying to imitate you. We have to remember that in Europe, where peoples had their racial unity from the beginning, and where natural resources were insufficient for the inhabitants, the civilisation has naturally taken the character of political and commercial aggressiveness. For on the one hand they had no internal complications, and on the other they had to deal with neighbours who were strong and rapacious. To have perfect combination among themselves and a watchful attitude of animosity against others was taken as a solution to their problems...Each nation must be conscious of its mission, and we, in India, must realise that we cut a poor figure when we are trying to be political...”<sup>50</sup> Tagore was correct in his observations that the historical basis of society in the West has been politics and that it has not been the case with India. However, what he said in this context about the basis of developments in India (which he calls the social problem), to my mind, is not deep enough.

In response to his welcome address at Kumbakonam after his return from the West, Swami Vivekananda pointed out: “I have seen a little of the world, travelling among the races of the East and the West; and everywhere I find among nations one great ideal which forms the backbone, so to speak, of that race. With some it is politics, with others it is social culture; others again may have intellectual culture and so on for their national background.

But this, our motherland, has religion and religion alone for its basis, for its backbone, for the bed-rock upon which the whole building of its life has been based...religion is the one and sole interest of the people of India. I am not just now discussing whether it is good to have the vitality of the race in religious ideals or in political ideals, but so far it is clear to us that, for good or for evil, our vitality is concentrated in our religion. You cannot change it. You cannot destroy it and put in its place another. You cannot transplant a large growing tree from one soil to another and make it immediately take root there. For good or for evil, the religious ideal has been flowing into India for thousands of years; for good or for evil, the Indian atmosphere has been filled with ideals of religion for shining scores of centuries; for good or for evil, we have been born and brought up in the very midst of these ideas of religion, till it has entered into our very blood and tingled with every drop in our veins, and has become one with our constitution, become the very vitality of our lives. Can you give such religion up without the rousing of the same energy in reaction...? Do you want that the Ganga should go back to its icy bed and begin a new course? Even if that were possible, it would be impossible for this country to give up her characteristic course of religious life and take up for herself a new career of politics or something else. You can work only under the law of least resistance, and this religious line is the line of least resistance in India. This is the line of life, this is the line of growth, and this is the line of well-being in India—to follow the track of religion.”<sup>51</sup>

What he meant by religion is the quest for the eternal, transcendental Truth, the true nature of man. This quest is so ingrained in the Indian psyche, by virtue of thousands of years of engagement with it, that it is difficult for anything else to have a deeper or more widespread appeal. And any effort at uprooting this and replacing it with something else will only cause damage. While “in other countries religion is only one of the many necessities in life,” something incidental, it is the life-line for Indians. Each must grow according to one’s own nature or law of growth and that is the path of least resistance for the person, because it throws up the least obstacles and instead facilitates the journey. In other words, the law of growth for India is not politics, but religion.

In his articles in *Udbodhan*, the Bengali magazine of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Prajnananda<sup>52</sup> explained with great clarity and logical rigour that “if one analyses scientifically, it is difficult not to call the civilisational entity that developed in [pre-British] India a “nation”, but it is for sure that such a nation did not develop anywhere else in the world.”<sup>53</sup> Prajnananda clearly delineated that the historical development of the Occidental



Source: *Samvit*, March 2016

Swami Prajnananda

countries was such that the people who had cohabited a common territory for a long time, rallied and united around the common cause of politics; hence there exists a very Western concept of nation defined in political terms. But the basic parameter for determining nationhood, according to him, is whether a collective occupying a common territory has united around a common goal for a sufficiently long period of time so as to determine its own predominant tendencies. If this definition is accepted then both the Western countries and India have been nations, only the common goal has been different in the two cases. Following Vivekananda, Prajnananda argued that the common goal Indians have

pursued for centuries is spirituality. However, if one insists that the common goal of a people has to be politics in order to justify the epithet of a nation, then, he writes, India was never a “nation”, and will never be one. But this narrow definition of ‘nation’, according to him, would be thoroughly unscientific.

Coming back to Tagore, on account of the potential for aggressive tendencies within nationalism, he viewed nationalism as a “menace”, a force that could lead people to “moral degeneracy” and “intellectual blindness”. Tagore saw the ravages that nationalism could cause, for instance, World War I. Vivekananda could see that the root cause of war was materialism that also informed the Western brand of nationalism. Vivekananda, instead, chose to emphasise the spirit of self-sacrifice embedded within nationalism. It matters which element one chooses to highlight. For example, having visited Japan, Vivekananda was quite aware of the Japanese efforts at expanding the army and the navy. But he never failed to appreciate the Japanese spirit of patriotism and extreme self-sacrifice for the nation (which is, of course, not the same thing as supporting the idea of war).

Thirdly, for Tagore, nationalism was too narrow an ideal that weaned one away from the greater ideal of universal brotherhood. Thus, he remarked: “Even though from childhood I had been taught that the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.”<sup>54</sup> Of course, universal humanism is a great ideal, but at the same time, every ideal has a proper place and function in human life and society. Nationalism also has its importance as an ideal. If one thinks in terms of graded progress from one ideal to another, then Sister Nivedita’s views in this regard shed light on an important aspect and complement Tagore’s views. She wrote: “Only by the love of our own people can we learn the love of humanity”, and that one “cannot be a cosmopolitan unless one be a nationalist. And to become a nationalist, we must extend our narrow self.”<sup>55</sup> Nationalism itself is a broad enough ideal that teaches one to expand the scope of love, to go beyond oneself and one’s kin to embrace the *civitas*, the whole nation as one’s own. It is indeed unfortunate that many consider this the end of the journey. But even for one who would love the whole of humanity, nationalism can be a necessary step.

The same point was made by Aurobindo Ghose in response to an article that appeared in *Bengalee* dated 29 June 1909, in which the author claimed that nationalism is the highest of all syntheses. Ghose did not agree with this view and replied thus in his article in *Karmayogin* dated 3 July: “[The author] even goes much further than we are prepared to go and claims for Nationalism that it is the highest of all syntheses. This is a conclusion we are not prepared to accept; it is, we know, the highest which European thought has arrived at so far as that thought has expressed itself in the actual life and ideals of the average European. In Positivism Europe has attempted to arrive at a higher synthesis, the synthesis of humanity; and Socialism and philosophical Anarchism, the Anarchism of Tolstoy and Spencer, have even envisaged the application of the higher intellectual synthesis to life. In India we do not recognise the nation as the highest synthesis to which we can rise. There is a higher synthesis, humanity; beyond that there is a still higher synthesis, this living, suffering, aspiring world of creatures, the synthesis of Buddhism; there is a highest of all, the synthesis of God, and that is the Hindu synthesis, the synthesis of Vedanta. With us today nationalism is our immediate practical faith and gospel not because it is the highest

possible synthesis, but because it must be realised in life if we are to have the chance of realising the others. We must live as a nation before we can live in humanity.”<sup>56</sup>

Thus, it may be argued that Tagore’s critique was true in its spirit, but it mistook the proper place of nationalism. Moreover, giving up national identities altogether would involve a completely different world order. So long as other nationalisms exist, Indian nationalism will and should exist. But we need to be careful nonetheless about the fact that the basis of Indian nationhood is not political, but moral and spiritual.

## **In Conclusion: Relevance of the Study**



Sister Nivedita

The past three years have seen a spate of publications as well as impassioned public debates on Indian nationalism. The issue of diversity has been played up in contemporary identity politics to such an extent that it has come to threaten the very fabric of Indian nationhood. These issues are our inheritance from a colonial past, and have been perpetuated by a skewed understanding of the subject. The past two years have also witnessed a revival of interest in Sister Nivedita, as 2017 marked her 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. As discussed above, her ideas on Indian nationhood can shed light on many of the intricacies of the debate on Indian nationalism that remains to be ironed out, especially with regard to issues such as the idea of India, a pre-history of Indian nationhood, the dynamics between diversity and unity, and so on.

Today, many scholars make similar arguments and their works demonstrate that what Nivedita had proposed was not a figment of imagination. For example, Shashi Tharoor makes exactly the same claims in his recent piece ‘The Idea of an Ever-ever Land’<sup>57</sup>. With reference to the prevalent view that the British gave India political unity, Tharoor argues that “throughout the history of the subcontinent, there has existed an impulsion for unity”, which was manifest in the several overarching empires, like the Mauryas, Guptas, Mughals, even Vijayanagara and the Marathas—all of whom tried to build a pan-subcontinent kingdom. He further argues: “The same impulse is also manifest in Indians’ vision of our own nation, as in the ancient epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which reflect an ‘idea of India’ that twentieth-century nationalists would have recognised. The epics have acted as strong, yet sophisticated, threads of Indian culture that have woven together tribes, languages and peoples across the subcontinent, uniting them in their celebration of the same larger-than-life heroes and heroines, whose stories were told in dozens of translations and variations but always in the same spirit and meaning.”<sup>58</sup> So much so that Tharoor even writes that the landscape the Pandavas saw in the Mahabharata was a pan-Indian landscape and “Lord Rama’s journey through India and his epic battle against the demon-king of Lanka reflect the same national idea.” He continues by invoking the cultural and geographical unity of India that is at least as old as Ashoka’s empire. Tharoor even invokes

the pan-India travel of Adi Sankara as an embodiment of the vision of Indian unity. If we look at more academic works on the historical and sacred geography of India, we would all the more realise the truth in Nivedita's claims and not dismiss them as uncritical sentimentalism.

It is important to recognise today that the fact that modern India is in a sense a product of colonial rule does not invalidate the reality of Indian nationhood. The underlying assumption of those who, on this ground, keep on questioning the validity of Indian nationhood, is that European nations are the 'original', therefore legitimate nations. It is too easily overlooked that even European nations had certain historical conditions as circumstances of their origin. Moreover, given the antiquity of the Indian land, it is well-nigh impossible that no sense of cohesion across large territories existed before the British arrived in India. In fact, Nivedita once stated that the British recognised the Indian nation all too well and that is the reason why they colonised India; had there not been the recognition of some kind of national cohesion or unity, they would have never thought of bringing disjointed parts into the same colony. The unintended and incidental contribution of the British in forging political unity in India does not take away from Indian nationhood its rightful legitimacy. Finally, given that a nation is always a *complex* unity, India's diversity actually contributes to Indian unity rather than being a divisive factor.

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that it is time to move beyond colonial legacies and think about a truly Indian narrative even on something such as 'nationalism', which is usually associated with the West. The lesson that India has to offer in the histories and pre-histories of nationalism is perhaps that one should learn to look at the phenomenon beyond its ideological dimensions and not conceive it exclusively in political terms.

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11. Bose, *The Nation as Mother*.
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13. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
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15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
16. Hans Kohn, 'Western and Eastern Nationalisms', in *ibid.*, pp. 162-165.
17. Hutchinson and Smith, *Nationalism*, p. 3.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
19. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1982, vol. 5, p. 27.
20. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, vol. 4, p. 288.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 263-264.
32. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2017, vol. 2, p. 47.
33. Pioneer of journalism in India, Editor, *Prabasi* (Allahabad) and *The Modern Review* (Calcutta).
34. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, vol. 4, p. 290.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 293-294.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 291.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 291; emphasis in original.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
41. Sister Nivedita, *Footfalls of Indian History*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1915, p. 16.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
43. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 2002, vol. 6, p. 642.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 642.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 642.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 643.

47. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1981, pp. 7-9.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
49. It is well-known that the character of Gora was based on Sister Nivedita herself. Tagore had even discussed the character and the plot of the novel with her. But the final version of the novel was published years after Nivedita passed away, so we do not know how his conceptualisation of the character evolved over the years.
50. Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, The Book Club of California, San Francisco, 1917, p. 117-118.
51. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2011 (reprint), vol. 3, pp. 177-179.
52. In his pre-monastic life, Swami Prajnananda was known as Devavrata Basu. He was active in revolutionary politics and swadeshi work. Along with Aurobindo Ghose, he was also arrested in the Alipore Bomb Case in 1908. They turned the prison into a veritable place for *sadhana*, as they spent most of their time in meditation and reading the scriptures. After his release from the prison, Devavrata Basu received spiritual initiation from Sri Sarada Devi and joined the Ramakrishna Order as a monk. He was a contemporary of Sister Nivedita and his own sister later took up the work of the girls' school started by Nivedita. Prajnananda wrote extensively in the two magazines of the Ramakrishna Order—*Udbodhan* in Bengali and *Prabuddha Bharata* in English.
53. Swami Prajnananda, 'Prachin Bharate Nation-Pratishtha', *Bharater Sadhana*, Udbodhan Karyalaya, Kolkata, 1986, p. 4. This is my own free translation.
54. Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 127.
55. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, vol. 5, p. 244.
56. *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 8, p. 84-85.
57. Shashi Tharoor, 'The Idea of an Ever-ever Land', in Nidhi Razdan, ed., *Left, Right and Centre: The Idea of India*, Gurgaon, Viking, 2017.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

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### **VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org), Website: <https://www.vifindia.org>

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