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Sister Nivedita, Aurobindo Ghose and Their Role at the Early Phase of the Revolutionary Movements in Bengal

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Abstract:

The intertwined contribution of Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose to the Bengali revolutionary movement, especially at the beginning of the 20th century, is interesting to take note of. While Nivedita considered Aurobindo to be a great revolutionary, the later was much inspired by the book Kali the Mother penned by the former. Aurobindo wanted to maintain a co-ordination between various revolutionary groups with a committee of which Nivedita used to be a member. He led the secret society to which Nivedita provided revolutionary literature. Yet much is not known about any revolutionary operation jointly led or undertaken by them. The nature of their collaboration remains debated over and demands historical scholarship. As their collaboration sharpened the rhetorical and organizational contours of early revolutionary nationalism, it remains a potential juncture of revolutionary movement in Bengal that, to a large extent, set in motion an alternative to the moderate politics practiced so far by the Indian National Congress.

Keywords: Sister Nivedita, Aurobindo Ghose, revolutionary movement, colonialism, swadeshi and boycott, secret societies.

1. Introduction:

The political turmoil that set in motion in Bengal at the beginning of the 20th century had a deep impact on how the trajectory of the national movement in the new century would shape up. The disappointment of a section of leaders, who came to be known as the extremists, with the moderate way of politics pursued by the Indian National Congress was palpable, especially in the wake of the Partition of Bengal in 1905. The incident triggered off a series of protests in Bengal, which in no time became widespread in different other parts of India. In Bengal it kicked off the Swadeshi and Boycott movement which was a sharp breach from the moderate policies of the Congress. The extremists openly championed the Swadeshi cause. In fact, the Indian National Congress in its Varanasi session in 1905 adopted a resolution in favour of the Swadeshi and Boycott movement. The hope in the indigenous alternatives of the swadeshi initiatives and the agitative aspect of the boycott movement rapidly created a



milieu that gave birth to the revolutionary nationalist movement in Bengal. Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose were the two important names that stand out in this regard.

2. Literature Review:

The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita, compiled by the Advaita Ashrama (2016) is the most prominent primary source. It presents the first-hand information and description of the topic under discussion but, remains, by and large, a current literature that has to be corroborated and cross checked with the later scholarly explanations.

Sri Aurobindo On Himself and on the Mother(1983)¹ is the autobiographical account of Aurobindo Ghose. Though it is an important source, it lacks chronological coherence and orderly presentation of his life story. It describes events in bits and pieces which, very often, contradicts widely accepted knowledge about him and thus calls for careful scrutiny of them.

Nivedita Lokamata written by Shankari Prasad Basu (B.S. 1424)² has several volumes, but volume II was of special significance for this study. It assesses the role played by Nivedita in India's revolutionary movements. Though the book is an authoritative source of information and interpretation, its arguments are often debated over and leaves room for further investigation.

Bhagini Nivedita by Pravrajika Muktiprana(2017)³ is an important observation on Nivedita's life. The book captures several aspects of Nivedita's life and could do so only in minuscule, which demands elaboration and further reading.

Sister Nivedita by Pravrajika Atmaprana(2017)⁴ is a widely referred book. It encompasses Nivedita's journey both in the West as Margaret E. Noble and Sister Nivedita in India. While discussing the endeavours taken up by Nivedita, the book highlights the over-arching sense of spirituality in Nivedita's works and estimates them as an outcome of Swami Vivekananda's aims and guidance.

3. Research Gap:

Academic scholarship has generally treated Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose separately. Aurobindo was a known revolutionary leader, a prime accused in the Alipore Bomb Case.

¹ Ghose, Aurobindo. (1953) *On Himself and on the Mother*, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo International University Centre, Retrieved from: https://ia800502.us.archive.org/20/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.96439/2015.96439.Sri-Aurobindo-On-Himself-And-On-The-Mother-Vol1_text.pdf accessed on 16/02/2023 at 12:38 p.m .

² Basu, Shankari Prasad. (B.S. 1424), *Nivedita Lokamata*, Vol. II, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta

³ Muktiprana, P. (2014). *Bhagini Nivedita*. Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School

⁴ Atmaprana, P. (2017). *Sister Nivedita*. Kolkata: Sister Nivedita Girls' School.



Nivedita also had connections with several secret revolutionary societies. Interestingly, she also was connected to Aurobindo 'in the field of politics. Hence, any look at their revolutionary collaboration either in the field of its ideological formation or active execution of programmes is historically pertinent and can help in understanding the nature of revolutionary campaign in Bengal with further insight.

4. Objectives of the Study:

- (i) To analyse the nature of the collaboration between Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose.
- (ii) To investigate their direct or indirect contribution in the field of revolutionary movement in Bengal mainly through their writing and speeches.
- (iii) To assess their influence on the contemporary young revolutionaries.
- (iv) To study the impact of revolutionary movements spearheaded by them as against the disappointment over moderate phase of politics.

5. Methodology:

The study uses a qualitative historical methodology combining primary source analysis and critical reading between the lines of the secondary literature. Primary sources mostly included *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, letters written by her, Aurobindo Ghose's *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother*, newspaper reports, and archival files. Primary documents were also cross-checked with secondary explanations and they were read keeping in mind the context of the significant historical events of the time such as Partition of Bengal in 1905, formation and activities of the contemporary revolutionary societies like Anushilan Samiti, Yugantar Dal etc. Secondary sources drew on several volumes of *Nivedita Lokamata* by Shankari Prasad Basu, books by Pravrajika Atmaprana, Muktiprana, Reba Som, Girija Shankar Roychowdhury, Bemanbehari Majumdar and many more.

6. Research Works/ Study Conducted:

A careful and historically sensitive reading was implied in the study with verification of the primary source information with other references and taking note of the contradictions found thereby. Multiple secondary sources, mainly books and research articles were scrutinized with each other and corroborated with the primary source materials and thus a comparative study was put into effect to arrive at the logical conclusion of the study.

7. Data Collection:

Primary data collection included the writings of both Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose, his memoirs, contemporary newspapers. Secondary data included biographies, scholarly



monographs, domestic and as well as foreign journals and periodicals and the critical take of the historians in their books.

8. Data Analysis:

- (i) The collected data was analyzed using a qualitative historical approach.
- (ii) Textual analysis was applied to deconstruct the ideological orientations in the primary sources and to detect and deal with the hagiographic approach in the secondary sources.
- (iii) Comparative analysis was done to derive the logical and historically agreeable conclusions.
- (iv) Contextual analysis was made to take into account the historical peculiarities of the period.
- (v) Critical historiographical review was employed to identify the gaps in the historical scholarship in this regard.

9. Findings:

9.1 The Context:

In January, 1898 Margaret Noble arrived in India as a follower of Swami Vivekananda. On 25th March the Swami formally initiated her into the Ramakrishna Order with a new name Sister Nivedita. Though, Nivedita came to India primarily to work for the education of women and by November of the same year she set up a girls' school at Bag bazar, in no time she developed her keen interest in the nationalist cause of India. Thoughts of Indian nationalism and freedom struggle kept her occupied. She took to writing championing Indian nationalist ideals vis-à-vis the colonial claim of 'civilizing the natives. Her writings centered around the themes of cultural revival, moral awakening and national pride. She roamed across the length and breadth of the country, delivering speeches and inspiring the youth to struggle against the colonial subordination.

9.2 The Meet and the Purpose:

Nivedita met Aurobindo Ghose at Baroda when she went there to deliver a lecture. Scholar has different opinion about the time of the meet. Shankari Prasad Basu is of the opinion that they met in 1902 whereas Girija Shankar Roychowdhuri asserts the year to be 1904 (Basu, [Shankari Prasad. \(B.S. 1424\)](#))⁵ Aurobindo Ghose confirms that he accompanied Nivedita at

⁵ Basu, Shankari Prasad. (B.S. 1424), *Nivedita Lokamata*, Vol. II, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, p. 184



Baroda and during those days they formed their friendship (Ghose, Aurobindo, 1953)⁶ Speculations were rife about the political overtone of this friendship. Girija Shankar is of the opinion that the meet with Aurobindo Gosh is the most important event in Nivedita's political life (Roychowdhury, Girija Shankar, 1960)⁷.

9.3 The Revolutionary Collaboration:

Aurobindo himself recollects that even at their meet at Baroda they did not spoke about spirituality, but discussed politics. When Nivedita came to know that Aurobindo has read and liked her book *Kali The Mother* she considered him to be 'a worshipper of Force' who belongs "to the secret revolutionary party herself." (Ghose, Aurobindo, 1953)⁸ They, in fact, both realised their mutual inclination towards revolutionary movements and started their endeavour with such political initiatives in Bengal. Aurobindo writes, "after I had started my revolutionary work in Bengal through certain emissaries, I went there personally to see and arrange things myself. I found a number of small groups of revolutionaries that had recently sprung into existence but all scattered and acting without reference to each other. I tried to unite them under a single organisation with the barrister P. Mitra as the leader of the revolution in Bengal and a central council of five persons, one of them being Nivedita" (Ghose, Aurobindo, 1953)⁹ But it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a proper correspondence between so many groups and arrive at any common decisions regarding the revolutionary programmes. As a result, the council soon had to be disbanded. This severed the contact between Nivedita and Aurobindo also until he joined the National College in Bengal as its Principal. This college was established as an indigenous educational institute and cater to the programme of boycotting the British educational institutions. Nivedita was happy to note that, "Education by the people for the people, is now at last being born in India. How Swamiji would have rejoiced to see the day." (Basu, Shankari Prasad, 2017).¹⁰

8.4 The Revolutionary Methods and Involvements:

Aurobindo wanted to develop a 'organised national resistance' by paralysing the administration with passive resistance, organising aggressive resistance "in shape of riots, assassinations, strikes and agrarian risings" and armed revolt. (Majumdar, Bimanbehari.

⁶ Ghose, Aurobindo. (1953) *On Himself and on the Mother*, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo International University Centre, p 97

⁷ Roychowdhury, Girija Shankar. (1960) *Bhagini Nivedita O Banglai Biplabbad*, Calcutta, Nimburg Offset, p 34

⁸ Ibid; Footnote-6

⁹ Ibid; Footnote-6

¹⁰ Basu, Shankari Prasad (Ed.). (2017). *Letters of Sister Nivedita*. Vol. II, Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, p. 104



1966)¹¹ Once he moved into Bengal's political arena, he became one of the main revolutionary leaders. He emerged as a formidable writer and organizer. He again came into contact with Sister Nivedita. Aurobindo became the chief-editor of the nationalist paper *Bande Mataram* and later of *Karmayogin*. The writings in *Bande Mataram* advocated complete independence. "He used to write also on the course of action needed for the mass movement, for example, swadeshi, passive resistance etc. and criticise the British rule and the British character" (<https://independencemuseum.in/?tab=Aurobindo>)¹² were serious enough to invite coercive measures by the government.

The "government prosecuted him soon after as the editor of the journal." (Som, Reba, 2017)¹³ Nivedita was an avid reader of such papers. In a letter to Ganandra Nath Brahmachari she asks him to 'subscribe to *Bande Mataram*' and post it 'in plain cover' to Kathgodam where she was stationed. (Amalprana, Pravrajika. 2016)¹⁴ It is notable that Nivedita was careful of keeping such correspondence secret. And, they are not known to have planned any revolutionary protest or action together, but Aurobindo himself admits that his relation with Nivedita was strictly in the revolutionary field and she was a "friend and comrade in the political field" (Ghose, Aurobindo, 1953).¹⁵

Aurobindo also mentions that, he and Nivedita were busy in their own works. Aurobindo was an extremist leader who believed in armed revolution is well known. Reba Som points out, "Perhaps the first systematic critique of Moderate politics was offered in 1893-94 in a series of articles titled *New Lamps for Old* by Aurobindo Ghose..." (Som, Reba, 2017)¹⁶ But, what Nivedita's 'own work' meant, as suggested by Aurobindo, is debated over. Scholars like Bimanbihari Majumdar, Shankari Prasad Basu, Girija Shankar Roychowdhury are of the opinion that Nivedita was a prominent leader of armed struggle in Bengal. He asserts that Aurobindo was more into the theoretical aspects of revolution, while Nivedita was more interested in its practical implementation (Roychowdhury, Girija Shankar. (1960).¹⁷ Barindra Kumar Ghose considers that as an extremist leader Nivedita was the predecessor of Aurobindo.

Nivedita was in contact with the leading revolutionary societies like The Dawn Society, Anushilan Samity. She became a catalyst in spurring the revolutionary sentiment among the

¹¹ Majumdar, Bimanbehari. (1966), *Militant Nationalism in India and Its Socio-Religious Background (1897-1917)*, Calcutta, General Printers & Publishers Private Limited, p. 69

¹² Retrieved from: <https://independencemuseum.in/?tab=Aurobindo> accessed on 10-08-2025 at 9:25 p.m.

¹³ Som, Reba.(2017), *Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda*, Gurgaon, Penguin Random House India, p. 164

¹⁴ Sister Nivedita. (2016), *More Letters of Sister Nivedita*, Kolkata, Sri Sarada Math, p. 154

¹⁵ Ibid; Footnote-6

¹⁶ Ibid; Footnote-13

¹⁷ Ibid; Footnote-7



members of those secret societies. Nivedita, 'with her first-hand acquaintance with European revolutionary movements', as Sumit Sarkar puts it, provided the revolutionary organizations with nationalist literature. According to Barindra Kumar she donated more than 150 to 200 books to their organization. Hemchandra Kanungo, a member of the Anushilan Samiti, divulges that it was Nivedita who inaugurated their *akhara* (centre of physical exercise), that was such an integral part of the contemporary revolutionary programmes. He also asserts that Nivedita trained few women to use guns. (Basu, Shankari Prasad, 2017)¹⁸

S.P. Basu (B.S. 1424)¹⁹ maintains that Nivedita had her own group of revolutionaries and She and Aurobindo used to visit places to recruit members for it. She was against any centralized single organization of the revolutionaries, as it might compromise the cover and security of all other revolutionaries, in case of any arrest of its member happens. When there was another possibility of Aurobindo's arrest in 1910, Aurobindo left for Chandernagore, a French colony, and therefore outside the British jurisdiction. It is suggested that this advice to shift to the French colony was given to him by Sister Nivedita. It is also noteworthy that, when Aurobindo moved to Chandernagore, the responsibility of publishing *Karmayogin* – the weekly journal started by Aurobindo, was taken up by Sister Nivedita.

9.5 Spreading Revolutionary Fervour:

However, there is no direct evidence to prove that Nivedita was involved in any planning and execution of armed operations. Pravrajika Atmaprana points out that, "If something incriminating was found, she would have been arrested or deported." (Atmaprana, Pravrajika, 2017)²⁰ But then, it is worth mentioning that though she was not arrested her letters were espionage upon by the colonial authority and there was a fair extent of the possibility of her arrest. She herself even thought of settling in the French colony Chandernagore.

She rather strived to enable them with 'courage and self-confidence to undertake whatever challenges presented themselves.' (Som, Reba, 2017)²¹ The nationalist sentiment she could generate among the youth was tremendous. Sir, Rashbehari Ghose hails that "If the dry bones are beginning to stir, it is because of Sister Nivedita breathed life into them." (Mukhopadhyay, Ishani. (2017).²²

¹⁸ Basu, Shankari Prasad (Ed.). (2017). *Letters of Sister Nivedita*. Vol. II, Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, p. 191

¹⁹ Basu, Shankari Prasad. (B.S. 1424), *Nivedita Lokamata*, Vol. II, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, p. 185

²⁰ Atmaprana, Pravrajika. (2017). *Sister Nivedita*, Calcutta, Pravrajika Devaprana

²¹ Som, Reba. (2017), p. 136

²² Mukhopadhyay, Ishani. (2017), *Bhagini Nivedita O Banglar Sashatra Biplab*, in Majumdar, Souren (Ed). (2017) Dhrupadi Eshana, Calcutta, Sreshta Bose, p. 159



Revolutionary movements of Bengal were not the work of a handful of people but it was made possible by a wide range of organizations, students and youth. Still, at a time when moderate political approach of the Congressmen was not seen to be effective, and the government placed its ploy to weaken and disrupt the unity of Bengal – the ‘bridgehead’ of the colonial empire, it created grave discontents among the politically aware Bengali intelligentsia. To translate this grievance into a considerable protest, to make it a force to reckon with, few leaders came forward. They took the movement out of the long-practiced mendicancy and initiated radicalism in Indian national movement. In Bengal, Aurobindo was the most prominent extremist at that time. Nivedita with her writings and speeches provided the much-needed moral justification of such radical, revolutionary acts, for which she was considered to be a traitor in the colonial administrative circle.

10. Social Impact:

(i) The study traces the intellectual and ideological bases of the revolutionary movement in Bengal. It shows that when the colonial authority found a way to deal with the moderate politics and could continue their rule without having to face any immediate and intense form of resistance, the revolutionary movement, particularly in the wake of the Partition of Bengal in 1905, made its presence felt. Though, ideologically apart, both the non-violent form of national movement and the revolutionary initiatives had the common goal of India’s freedom. Both these strands of movements have their own contribution in the freedom struggle of India.

(ii) As, the study uncovers the less explored contributions of Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose in the revolutionary movements in Bengal, it helps to provide a potential insight and, in turn, widens the overall understanding of the freedom movement of India. It shows how nationalism drew its strength from spiritual philosophy, cultural revivalism how they all justified the need of the armed resistance. As against jumping into quick decisions the study points to a phlegmatic approach of estimating the place of Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose in revolutionary movement of Bengal and in the overall freedom struggle of India, discouraging the hagiographic writings on both of them.

11. Conclusion:

Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose were the prominent figures in the initial phase of the revolutionary movements in Bengal. Though, they are not known to have directly taken-part in any revolutionary actions, their association with revolutionary politics is undeniable, which was enough for the colonial authority to arrest Aurobindo Ghose and raise suspicion on



Nivedita's activities and engage surveillant attention on her letters and correspondence. Their main role was much felt in their ability and inspire and engage the youth in revolutionary activities. Their collaboration and mutual recognition amplified their capacity to influence youth circles as well as to turn public opinion in favour of revolutionary nationalism, which, in turn, was instrumental in providing the much-needed moral justification to such acts and as against the wanning out of moderate phase of politics for the time being.

12. Delimitation of the Study:

The study delimits its focus on the role of Sister Nivedita and Aurobindo Ghose in the revolutionary in Bengal, mainly between 1902 and 1911 as Nivedita died in 1911 and Aurobindo turned to spirituality after 1910. The study mainly confines itself within Bengal as the period is marked by the Swadeshi and Boycott movement in the wake of the Partition of Bengal. It does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all the revolutionary organisations but specifically focuses on those which had the influence of both Nivedita and Aurobindo such as Anushilan Samiti and Yugantar Dal. Moreover, the study only presents a historical analysis leaving aside the other discipline-specific approaches on the subject.

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