

The British Brahmacharani - Sister Nivedita

Jawhar Sircar

Jawhar Sircar's review of Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda By Reba Som

{Reba Som, Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda, Penguin Random House, India, Gurgaon, India, 2007, 291 pages, Rs.599, ISBN 9780670088799}

Reba Som has done it again. She came out with a book on Tagore (*Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and his Song, 2009*) just before his 150th birth anniversary and now when Sister Nivedita's turn has come, she has produced a comprehensive biography on her. It is packed with facts and references, many of which are from the humongous volume of letters that Nivedita wrote, that reveal her innermost feelings. Som makes a valiant attempt to rescue the real Nivedita from the prim official image that Indian national history has constructed and to pull her out of the overwhelming shadow of Vivekananda, whose towering personality dominates the landscape, belittling however inadvertently, those so close to him. But the subtle subtitle *Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda* conveys only a part of her story for though she had left home and hearth to be with him and serve his people, she remained quite an independent person all her life. Vivekananda was clear, maybe not without his own traumas, that she should be alifelong celibate like him. Thus, within two months of her setting foot on Indian soil in January 1898, he himself ordained Margaret Noble (endearingly called Margot) as Sister Nivedita, a *brahmacharini*, a Hindu nun. So inspired was she by his talks in London in 1895-96 that she joined his restless mission to galvanise Indians, but it is clear from her several upheavals that her interface and expectations were far more complex. Reba Som does well to take us through the evolution of Nivedita's relationship with the person she had called her 'king', then her 'master' and how he finally appeared as her 'father'.

This book will fill in a gap in the knowledge of modern Indians who hardly ever recall the path-breaking contribution that this visionary Irish woman made to the cause of India's self respect and freedom: and lit a solitary lamp quite boldly during the nation's darkest hour. Like Swamiji, she exhorted upon a thoroughly demoralised lot of Indians to be proud of their motherland and to stand up to the most repressive phase of British imperialism. Her involvement with Indian revolutionaries in their fight against the mighty but unjust British empire was so strong and genuine that Vivekananda's own Ramkrishna Mission had to distance itself from her, soon after her master's death. As Som's penetrative narrative reveals, Nivedita remained the perennial outsider as not many Indians could accept her fiery zeal, while her own people viewed her as an embarrassment and considered her a rebellious trouble maker. The author goes through the tumultuous life of this British lady with the empathy of a woman and notices details that previous biographers may have missed. She reads between the lines from the numerous letters she relies upon "to reveal a flesh-and-blood Nivedita" and does not shy away from the oft repeated question as to whether it was Vivekananda or his cause that attracted her.

We get glimpses into the life of Swamiji and his mercurial style of functioning for he was a man in a hurry: he had, after all, prophesied that he would not live long. "From the moment of her landing, Margaret sensed that the personality of her Master was caught in fruitless torture and struggle, like a lion trapped in a net" (p.15). He warned her about her impetuous nature and her tenacity to argue too much, but this mellowed her not too much. His firmness and injunctions could be quite harsh, as Nivedita found to her dismay. "It goes to Nivedita's credit that she withstood Vivekananda's harsh discipline, although she did have emotional breakdowns from time to time, when she was comforted" by her friends (p.23).

It was, however, the same Swamiji who spent endless hours explaining patiently to her what India stood for, her forgotten glories and how to extricate this great country and her people from the quicksands that were pulling them down so mercilessly. The author mentions about the terrible plague that attacked Calcutta in May 1898 and how Nivedita plunged headlong into the rescue of the city miserable masses. But she omits to mention that she had literally shamed many of the monks of the new Ramakrishna Mission, who had assumed that their lives were to be spent mainly in prayer, by getting them to follow her to the streets and slums in the service of humanity. This was, indeed, a turning point in the Mission's history and it was the first ever recorded large scale cleanliness mission that predates Gandhi's drive by decades and the current Swachh Bharat initiative by more than a century.

The author recounts in some detail of how Vivekananda went to Almora in the Kumaon Hills with a large band of followers including three white women and mentions how "during their stay...when the tussles went beyond control, making the suffering of Nivedita unbearable, the two older women..... often interceded with the Swami, bringing him to his senses". (p.25). But the episodes and clashes are missing and we thus miss some of the most sensitive parts of the intricate relationship between the Master and his disciple. Som makes a passing reference later: "Nivedita confessed that even after 'that awful time at Almora, when I thought he had put me out of his life contemptuously....I have grown *more* personal in my love"(p. 59) .The Almora phase has been examined by others and Som could have done a better job in interpreting from a woman's point of view the volcano of pent up feelings, not necessarily of love, that were bared during the heady ride up the scenic hills towards the Himalayas. Its eternal serenity only only exacerbated the emotional storms.

An interesting facet of Vivekananda that comes out in the book is his incapacity to tolerate any of Nivedita friendships with other prominent men like Tagore or Okakura, the charismatic Japanese scholar, or even a ship's captain. The author leaves us to surmise whether this was due to his sense of duty to protect an utterly frank and partly gullible foreign lady who had left all she had at his word or whether they reveal human feelings or failings. She recounts many a snide remark from Swamiji that prove that even Vivekananda could not be a perfectly detached monk. When Okakura left India and Nivedita's dotting company in 1902, Swamiji's wrote to a confidant "Was (India) not sublime enough for Mr Okakura? Or Japanese do not like sublimity at all? How is Margot? Is she still there? Or gone away with Mr Okakura?" (p. 100). This was just a month before his death Vivekananda never hid his feelings of dislike for Rabindranath Tagore's "effeminate writings" that stood in his path to make Indians more manly and both great personalities avoided each other. Nivedita's independent nature comes out so clearly when despite Swamiji's views she met Tagore repeatedly and enjoyed his company. The poet heartily reciprocated and wanted more time with her, but could never understand how she was so strongly an orthodox Hindu, why she hated the West so fiercely and what she saw in Vivekananda's mission and philosophy.

Nivedita's Celtic spirit was at its best in the face of challenges and in combating injustice. She set up the first girls school of its type in the heart of conservative Calcutta that was against it. She went from door to door to the utter amazement of orthodox housewives, who had never imagined that a white lady, a white Hindu, could care so much for India and Indians. She galvanised Calcutta against Curzon's Partition of Bengal and exposed the haughty India-baiting Viceroy as a petty liar. She stood beside Acharya JC Bose in his darkest hour and chastised her countrymen for their pettiness, racialism and unfairness. She encouraged the Indian style of art and encouraged artists like Nandalal Bose, who would all become iconic figures, to rediscover their past glory through this medium. We thank Som for rekindling interest in Nivedita. It was long overdue. She narrates other details from the nine years that Nivedita lived after Vivekananda's death in 1902 and sums up her lasting legacy rather well.

Reba Som is, however, a better chronicler than a story teller. She retains the historian's obsession with dates and references but has not, mercifully, written one more academic tome that only scholars would understand. We admire her command over facts but wish at times that she were a trifle more gossipy, without compromising on truth. Her work strives to cover that

middle ground between the demands of regimented historians and the hunger of the general reader for a lucid tale.