Rabindranath Tagore Special Issue Article-3
Tagore : Nivedita : Relations
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ABSTRACT:
Rabindranath Tagore and Nivedita has got a rare type of relations between them. This paper is an attempt to focus light on this relationship.

Full Version of Paper
Tagore’s long essay, Bhagini Nivedita, written in the November 1911, a few weeks after her death. Scientist Jagadishchandra Bose had personally requested the poet to write the prose. The poet consciously deviated from the line of conventional reminiscence writing. It was rather an impersonal evaluation of Sister Nivedita, where Tagore ushered the best of his respect, as though taking the responsibility of paying deserving tribute to her on behalf of the nation. It was in this essay that he adorned her with the title *Lokemata* (Mother of People) which was later universally accepted and much publicized. The poet wrote, “Basically, she was the *Lokemata*. We had never seen such an image of Motherhood that could extend beyond a family to the whole country”. How it is possible that after such reverence, it is believed and pointed out that Tagore had same personal grudge against Nivedita.

Thompson’s confusion infects us too. How can a person with such a personal grudge towards Nivedita express such reverence for the same person while writing?

In fact, this contradiction lies in the basic structure of the relationship between Nivedita and Rabindranath, where respectful friendliness and deep malice revolves like an ebb and flow.

Unfortunately, till the recent past, no research worthy of the name had been done to explore the details of the interaction between the two legends. There is a widespread notion that Sister Nivedita of Ramkrishna –Vivekananda, as she preferred to refer herself, and Rabindranath of Brahma Samaj had a cultural distance that was impossible to bridge.

In spite of such obvious differences, there were some sensible possibilities closer. First, Nivedita’s family was Protestant. She was brought up in a religious environment that did not believe in external splendour. It was more or less like the simple Upasana system of the Brahmos. Second, Nivedita was at home in the Tagore family, marked by their grandeur, sophisticated aristocracy, Western etiquette and connoisseurship.

Here again erupts another level of contradiction where the coexistence of mental attraction and adversion makes exploration of the relationship more interesting.

For Nivedita, it was attraction at first sight. In her diary she admitted a fascination for “his appearance, bearing, voice and language”. (Pravrajika Atmaprana, Sister Nivedita of Ramkrishna-Vivekananda.) But Tagore’s reaction was not at all positive. His later recalled, “I thought her to be just another English Missionary. (The) only difference was
her religious sect.” So he requested her to assume the responsibility for his daughter Meera’s English education. Nivedita refused point blank, “Do you want me to play the part of transforming a Tagore into a little girl of (the) West End?” Her eyes must have flashed with anger. “Are you, a Tagore, so influenced by Western culture that you want to corrupt your child’s soul before it is fully formed?” (Lizelle Reymond, The Dedicated.) Reymond Nivedita’s French biographer, said, “Nivedita had become a favoured guest in the house of the Tagore family, where a religious discussion was apt to begin as soon as she arrived. Rabindranath Tagore evoked a world of love and beauty in a song whose music was inseparable from the singer himself, and sometimes he would come and read his verses to her in her house at Bag Bazar”. But at the same time Reymond commended, “Although they became real friends, Nivedita remained a complex and contradictory personality to the Hindu poet”.

Rabindranath was then the secretary of the Adi Brahmo Samaj. Her closeness with the poet and his family led Nivedita to nature an ambitious plan: she wanted to attract the younger generation of the Brahmos to the ideology of the Ramkrishna movement. Even Swami Vivekananda gave consent to her intention. On 22 January 1899 he asked Nivedita to “make inroads into the Brahmos”. He suggested that Nivedita invite her Brahmo friends to a tea party, which he himself would attend.

According to that plan, a tea was held at Nivedita’s Bag Bazar residence on 28 January 1899 where Rabindranath, Swamiji and Nivedita talked. But it became evident that the impractical and emotional plan of bridging Sri Ramkrishna’s Kali worship and the Advaita philosophy of the Brahmos would never materialize. On 11 March 1899, Swamiji warned Nivedita, “…. As long as you go on mixing with that (Tagore) family Margaret, I must go on sounding this gong. Remember, that family has poured a flood of erotic venom over Bengal.” Nivedita was at last disillusioned with the Tagore family. In her letter to Josephine MacLeod, she wrote on 4 May 1899, “So we are to give up …. After all, who are these Tagores?” (Letters of Sister Nivedita, Vol-I).

This bitterness with the Tagore family as well as with the Brahmos would have been enough to make Nivedita adverse to Rabindranath the person. But both Nivedita and Rabindranath did not let this misunderstanding come in the way of their mutual admiration. So they continued communicating, writing letters and even planning to visit Shilaidaha. Then in June 1899, as Nivedita had to accompany Swamiji on his trip overseas, her direct link with the poet was temporarily discontinued.

During her stay in London, Nivedita played an important role in introducing Rabindra-literature to Western readers. With the help of Jagadishchandra and his wife Abala Bose, she translated three Rabindranath’s short stories of English – Kabuliwala (The Kabuliwallah), Dena-paona (Giving and Getting Return), and Chhuti (Leave of Absence). But that first attempt to translate Tagore stories failed to attract any publisher. Patrick Geddes, the biographer of Jagadishchandra, commented that at that time “the West was not sufficiently interested in Oriental life!”
In course of time, the manuscripts of Dena-paona and Chhuti were somehow lost. The Kabuliwallah was ultimately published in Modern Review (January 1912 issue) – a few months after Nivedita died. It was later included among 11 others, in the first international edition of Tagore short stories, Hungry Stones and Others Stories (McMillan, 1916).

Nivedita returned to India in February 1902. Vivekananda passed away on July 4. Subsequently Nivedita, at least “officially”, separated herself from the Ramkrishna Mission. Apparently that was an ideal situation for Nivedita and Rabindranath to come closer. But the difference in their political ideology became a major hindrance. Nivedita believed that the Indian independence movement should be in the line of the armed Irish Revolution, which Tagore strongly disagreed with.

But on the other hand, they had a similar philosophy regarding Indian education. Hence their voice against the University Bill, 1904, introduced by Lord Curzon, were almost on an identical wavelength. Besides, establishing the Shantiniketan Brahmacharyshram, Tagore was then planning to a start a traditionally Indian teachers’ training school at their Jorasanko house. And he requested Sister Nivedita to assume charge of it.

On October 1904, a 20 member team from Kolkata, including Nivedita, Rabindranath, Jagadishchandra Bose and his wife, Ratcliff (then editor of The Statesman) and his wife started for Bodh Gaya. In his reminiscence, Rabindranath Tagore wrote, “The presence of three geniuses, Jagadishchandra, Nivedita and Rabindranath, made the sacred place of Bodh Gaya all the more extraordinary”. He further remarked, “I believe this visit to Bodh Gaya resulted in my father’s profound interest in Buddhist religion and literature”.

(Pitrismriti.)

On 30 December 1904, Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine went to Shilaidaha as the guest of Rabindranath. Jagadishchandra and Abala Bose were also there at that time. The Sisters stayed there on the Padma river in a boat named Nagar. In the daytime they used to roam about the adjoining villages as arranged by the poet. In the afternoon they went to the bajra where Rabindranath stayed.

Discussions and singing songs with him were the main attractions there. One day Rabindranath sang one of his devotional songs, Pratidin aami, hey jibanswami …. Nivedita listned with her eyes closed, engrossed in meditation.

One day she requested Rabindranath to tell a story. Sitting on the deck of his houseboat, he told a tale of a young Irishman: He wanted to stay in India just like an Indian. After assimilating Indian customs and cultures, he wanted to devote the rest of his life to the true progress of this country. But after learning about his foreign origin, his close female follower refused to accept him.

Except for the ending, the storyline was of course that of Gora, the largest novel of Tagore. Hearing the story, Nivedita was emotionally very hurt. She herself was Irish. She
was selflessly working for India. Now, telling her such a story was practically an insult to her.

Rabindranath later confessed in one of his letters to WW Pearson, “You ask me what connection the writing of Gora had with Sister Nivedita. She was our guest in Shilaidaha and in trying to improvise a story according to her request I gave her something very near to the plot of Gora. She was quite angry at the idea of Gora being rejected even by his disciple Sucharita owing to his foreign origin. You won’t find it in Gora as it stands now – but I introduced it in my story which I told her in order to drive the point deep into her mind.”

Which point did the poet want to drive deep into Nivedita’s mind? Was it his debatable belief that Indians would never truly accept a foreigner? If that were the case, the poet should surely be accused of a misdeed.

On the pretext of telling a story, he had deviated from his natural courteous behaviour. Many researchers of Tagore literature later found some deep resemblance between Nivedita and the character of Gora. Reymond even went to the extent of saying that “something of Nivedita was to find embodiment in Rabindranath Tagore’s novel, Gora, whose principal character was modeled upon her, and which contained many incidents from her life. The book was published .... Years after Nivedita’s death, but she had known its plot and had discussed it with the author”.

Nivedita returned from Shilaidaha to BagBazar with a deep grudge against Tagore. She wrote to Sara Bull, “..... We are learning now to understand what it was that Swamiji felt about them all ...... By Monday ( 2 January 1905 ) noon, I had nothing left in me to say, either to him (?) or to God.”

For the rest of life, that is, nearly six and half years, Nivedita never showed any urge to reconcile. This was also true on Tagore’s part. But just after her death in Darjeeling on 13 October 1911,

Rabindranath readily accepted the proposal of writing the long prose, Bhagini Nivedita. Some years after, on 21 October 1917, Tagore wrote the foreword to the second edition of Nivedita’s book, The Web of Indian Life. There again he was equally respectful to her, “She had own her access to the innermost heart of our society ...... and came to know us by becoming one of ourselves”.

That is not all. A few months before his death, on 23 May 1941, Rabindranath was more analytical in his conversation with rani Chanda,

“Women have one thing, that is their very inner one – Emotion. When this Emotion mixes with character, it becomes wonderful. Nivedita showed the example .... She loved this country as well as its people with all her heart. It is difficult to express how pure this love was. She sacrificed her everything. Her bravery and self –denial astonished me”. At the fag of his life, Rabindranath paid heartfelt homage to his Lokemata.