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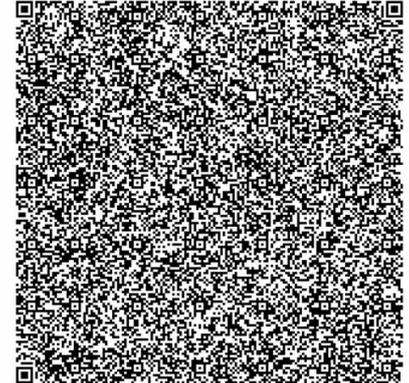
Sister Nivedita: Pioneering Women's Education in India with a Blend of Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

The article discusses the pivotal role of Sister Nivedita in promoting women's education in India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and a believer in Advaita Vedanta, Sister Nivedita opened a girls' school in an orthodox Hindu locality in Calcutta in 1898, marking a significant shift in traditional educational practices. She emphasized the importance of rootedness in Indian culture while also advocating for modern intellectual development, scientific understanding, and national pride among women. The text underscores her belief that education should be moral and primarily concerned with character development rather than mere intellectual accumulation. Sister Nivedita's approach integrated household responsibilities with intellectual pursuits, fostering a holistic development of women. The text further explores the need for the modernization of women's education in the East, blending the deep wisdom of Eastern traditions with the scientific and intellectual rigor of the West. Sister Nivedita's vision for women's education continues to be relevant today, emphasizing the importance of integrating traditional knowledge with modern learning to create a balanced and enlightened society.

Keywords: Sister Nivedita, Women's education, Advaita Vedanta, Character development, Modernization.



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Introduction:

Education has long been recognized as a cornerstone of societal progress and individual empowerment. In the context of India, where rich cultural traditions intermingle with the demands of modernity, the education of women holds particular significance. The journey towards educating women in India is multifaceted, reflecting not only the evolution of educational systems but also the complex interplay between tradition and progress, community and individuality. Within Indian society, the samaj, or community, forms the backbone of familial and societal structures. In this intricate web of relationships, the education of women carries profound implications not only for the individual but also for the collective strength of the community. As we delve into the nuances of women's education, we encounter themes of cultural identity, societal roles, and the integration of tradition with intellectual development.

The Education of Woman in India-

What India needs today is education, more and deeper than any she has yet attained. In contemplating this we must not unduly exalt our need of others. None is really taught by another. True teaching is always self-teaching. Real education is self-education. By our own vision of the ideal, and by our

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own struggle to reach its height, do we really rise; by no other means whatsoever. It matters nothing in what form the ideal appears to us; it matters not at all whether the upward path is hard or easy. All that matters is our own struggle. By that do we rise. This struggle has now reached the period of its highest importance. We are face to face with a definite educational problem, whose general form and dimensions we are able to envisage. The mind of our people as a whole is to be set free to reflect within the great processes of our outward striving. The community is grappling with its own spiritual destinies, labouring at all costs to recover and re-express its old self-consciousness of nationality and the civic life. And each home must adjust itself in its own way, at its own rate, to each increment of these inspirations, as it is won.

The Samaj is the Strength of the Family: the home is behind the civic life and the civic life sustains the nationality. This is the formula of human combination. The essentials of all four elements we have amongst us. We have inherited all that India needs, in our ancient Dharma. But we have allowed much of their consciousness to sleep. We have again to realize the meaning of our own treasures. Public spirit is the reflection within, of the groupings that transcend the home without. If we are struggling to renew the city and the nation, then the affairs of the city and the nation must occupy our thought and feeling. Our love of people and country must be conscious, not merely latent, and the effort to awaken this in ourselves will constitute the largest factor in true education.

Reading and Writing are Serviceable to Effort: but they can never take its place. Many kinds of knowledge will appear desirable to those who are thus striving to subordinate their own experience to that of the country, trying to merge themselves in the unities that include the home. But such knowledge may for the most part be classified— outside the three R's— as History, Geography and Science. Most of the facts that go to build up the communal spirit will be gathered from one or other of these sources. A world-sense; a time-sense; and a feeling for the fact in itself; these three things make up the modern conception; and these are Geography, History, and Science.

Nurturing Minds through Everyday Encounters: where there is opportunity for the process of education, it ought to run on these lines. For the most part, however, we are educated by no definite process, but by participating in the ideas of those about us. Few lessons are so memorable in after-life, as a father's kindly answers to his children's questions, asked as they sat at meals, or rested in his arms. The very importance of reading and writing as a means to education lies in the wider area of thought and opinion that they throw open to us. Books, Newspapers, and Magazines carry the thought of the world and the commune without, into the home within. The great mind-tides of the national ocean wash up, by their means, on the quiet shores of the women and the family.

Empowering Individuals within their Communities: The great end and aim of all educational efforts then lies in rendering the individual efficient as an atom in his community and that community efficient as an atom in humanity. To do this, a certain care and forethought are necessary. For it is in his own community that the individual is to inhere. Here we come on the crime of those who educate an Indian girl to be an ornament of English or French society. The main value of education is not individual but social and communal. And a woman of merely European associations is as out of place in the Indian world as a Dodo amongst a flock of pheasants, or a deer amongst cows. As a matter of fact, however, the method in this case necessarily defeats the end, and the girl is exceedingly unlikely to realize either ideal. By a false education, she has been made critical of her own people and their institutions, without herself fulfilling the ideal of any other. It is not by teaching a Bengali girl French, or the piano, but by enabling her to think about India, that we really educate her, and make of her one with whom the world's greatest minds are proud to be associated.



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Cultivating Education and Nurturing Minds from Home to the World: To attempt this, every home is competent. The will of the mother may indeed flow through each individual, as the ocean through an empty shell. The experience of the country may loom so large in any one life, that the personal experience is made small beside it. But the spirit that feels thus is only to be caught from fires already kindled. Throughout the day, those who would light this fire, must first give themselves to the great pre-occupation. The children at their lessons will catch the thought, and their knowledge as it comes will add to it fresh power. Let each begin where he can. It is a case of “Bring your own lotus to blossom, and the bees will come of themselves.” In the ideal education, the great interest of life is built up in three stages; first there are the studies of childhood; then there is travel; and last of all comes the chosen task. Such was the life of Savitri, and such is all perfect life. We learn to the end. There is no point at which education ends. But in forming the idea of India as an absorbing passion, a few years of pilgrimage, before the serious work of life begins, give the most perfect aid. This, it will be remembered, is travel within India. Not outside. Foreign travel is good, when the mind has been trained to understand and benefit by what it sees. But merely to see and hear strange things, without a purpose, without a leading idea, without any wisdom of life, is as dangerous as any other form of gluttony or indigestion. The same thing, in the same system, may be made to act as food or as poison, according to the conditions under which it is absorbed.

Towards National Consciousness: Even in India, purposeless travel breeds meaningless love of change, while travel for an idea gives a supreme vision and delight. To prepare one's (laughters to understand their country when they see her, would not be a bad way of summing up the object of childhood schooling. To do so, how much must one not learn! Certainly no eye as yet has gathered the full glory of India, as the Indian woman of the future will gather it. Chittoor and Benares, Ujjain and Rajgir, Elephanta and Conjeeveram, — to appreciate these, how much is to be studied! And of the whole to be enjoyed, how small a fraction are these! The home as an organ of the commune, education by public spirit and by travel, lead us to the last great factor in the perfect life, the individual task, through which each soul takes its own place in the national whole. Above all, this work must be selfless. No love of display, no thirst for fame or praise, must be allowed to vulgarize her who desires to offer herself at the feet of the Mother. The great teacher of Dakshineswar used to hold gold in one hand and earth in the other, and change them backwards and forwards, from hand to hand, muttering ‘Earth is Gold! Gold is Earth! till, having lost all sense of their relative values, he could throw them both into the river. Similarly let us say, “India is all, I am nothing! I am nothing! India is all” till one idea alone remains with us, of throwing away self and life and ease, as so much dross, in the great stream of effort that is making for the national righteousness.

Women's Role in Nurturing the Idea of India: It may be that we are called only to silence and thought. Then let our silence be dynamic, let our thought be prayer. Let our quiet shelter the idea of India, as a lamp might be kept from flickering, behind the screen of an outstretched veil. Even silence serves for woman must ever provide the force out of which man acts. It is faith cherished in the home that governs action in the world. To hold a thought and be true to it unwavering, is far greater than to spring impulsively to noble deeds. In a nation, we want both~ woman, the mother, to keep the faith; man, the child, to fight its battles. The saint who prays over the sleeping city is ever feminine, ever vigilant, ever silerit. 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.

The Education of Women-

The great question of the day is that of woman's education. In time to come it will be said that this generation was the turning point in the history of woman. As always, it is the ideals of the new movement, rather than its form that are all important. Forms create themselves. Ideals give birth, they do not receive it.



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Education is above all things a moral function, and concerned with man, primarily as a moral being. This is sometimes forgotten, as if its business were with the intellect. It is rather with the will. We have to think truly in order to will efficiently. We have to feel nobly, in order to will high. What is it we would teach our girls? What do we want them to be? What do we want them to avoid First and foremost, we must root them in their own past. Not in blind adhesion, not in vain repetition. It is a noble past that makes a noble future. We must fearlessly give them the discriminating eye, the testing heart. They must see the blank spaces of need. But they must recognize the noble intention. They must feel the pride that says "It was my forefathers, who did this."

Embracing Cultural Identity and Redefining Responsibilities: We must give Indian girls their own colour. We do not want pale imitations of American or English women. We want on the contrary a womanhood that can contribute something to the circle, which would otherwise have lacked it. For this we must convince it of its own Indianness. How shall this be done? Some will answer the question in one way and some in another. In the case of the orthodox, it may seem easiest. But everywhere it is the first duty, to convince the Indian girl in her heart, her conscience, her intellect, and her will, that she is Indian indeed, and not a foreigner. The world must be seen through the home. Only knowledge in synthesis is true knowledge. Only knowledge that is true in synthesis yields power of, thought to become new knowledge. Holding itself in its own place, the rightly trained mind projects its own new synthesis. The educated woman should not be less a home-maker than the uneducated. Rather, she should make a finer home. We are educated, not that we may find easier duties but that we may add to ourselves duties that the uneducated never thought of. Submission was the noblest effort of the uneducated woman. Responsibility is rather the call that comes to the educated. To fill a small part in a great whole was the ancient destiny of woman to create that whole in which her own life is to form a part, is the modern demand upon her. How is woman to be fitted for this?

The Role of Women in the Home and Society for Embracing Tradition while Engaging with Modernity: There is a great deal of discussion as to whether girls should be trained in household service or not. But such discussion is largely academic. The question answers itself. In a wholesome happy woman's life, whether she live in a palace or a mud hut, whether East or West, there is always a certain amount of household and family care. Teachers, writers, and doctors may escape this, but that is only because they are sacrificed by the community, and therefore to a certain extent specialized and abnormal. Even during the years of study, an Indian girl cannot be altogether freed from household service. And a very beautiful spirit, of regarding study as a privilege, is the result. How valuable is the habit of personal independence in matters of service, will be seen by anyone who has to transfer a party of Indian women from one place to another. An empty house, water, and a few utensils, are all they need, and they scatter, happily and spontaneously, to carry out the habit of their lives. There is no anxiety here, as to how they are to be amused! A river, a garden, a veranda, and they entertain themselves. If a temple be added, then so much the better. But it is wonderful how simple are the necessities of life! It is wonderful, the beauty and dignity of the world that creates itself so easily! No one who has seen and understood this condition, no one who has appreciated the safeguards it offers, to health, to happiness, and to character, will be ready to part lightly or thoughtlessly, with the old Hindu culture of the woman's morning duties.

It is precisely this womanhood, so sane, so disciplined, so helpful, to which we desire to offer the larger scope of current intellectual conceptions. It is this womanhood that we would call into the world-council, to speak out its judgment on the great issues of the day. Sweetness, quietness, and Indianness are undoubtedly the influences that may be expected of it.

Empowering Women's Minds by Integrating Tradition with Intellectual Development: These will be best gained by establishing the old order of life as a personal discipline, and building upon it the great new order of intellectual development. Scientific standards, geographical conceptions, historical pre-possessions, these



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are the three characteristics of the modern mind, and we want women's minds to manifest through them, as deeply and as powerfully as men's. We want women to be as competent to consider problems involving these, as men. Unless women are united with men in the scrutiny of life, that scrutiny must for ever remain crippled and barren, unproductive of spiritual growth or civilizing gain. Humanity is only complete in the two-fold organ, the feminine mind united with the masculine, and neither alone.

Modern Education of the Oriental Woman-

It is clear that if the modern mind, with its scientific severity and its accurate sense of time and place, is to find any Oriental expression, the school will have to become as much a part of life to the Eastern girl as to the Eastern boy. Severe intellectual discipline and anxious knowledge of facts must be added to the delicate grace and deep mother-wisdom of the Oriental woman. Truth must be carried from the mythological into the scientific setting. The passion for knowledge must no longer be reserved for the religious, but must also be awakened, on what we commonly distinguish as the secular side of life. Strong personal refinement will no longer appear as guide sufficient in facing the problem of life. Warm affection will no longer be thought the only desirable qualification for the sick-bed nurse. And the information and training, necessary to such offices, will have to be sought by a girl as eagerly as was ever the knowledge of cooking, or the skill to offer household worship.

The Symbiosis of Home and School in Education: But the school and the home, while thus equally necessary, must in the ideal education act and react upon one another. They must not represent different and antagonistic worlds, but separate elements in a single complex whole. The one must illuminate and explain the other. That which at the hearth-side forms a vague but beloved dream, must be brought by education into clearness and understanding. That life is fore-doomed to failure in which school and house seek to thwart and baffle one another. Thus, the heroic literature which in the family is a haunting inspiration, becomes in school and college an ever-widening field of joy and knowledge. The gentle dictates of the mother are heard again, with more impersonal authority, from the lips of the teacher. The growing intellectual vision makes increasingly precious all that the love and faithfulness of parents and forbears have built up for us, through the patient ages of the past. Life moves onward, into wider and wider reaches of thought and expression, without sacrificing anything of its old integrity and coherence.

Women and the Arts-

We talk a great deal of what is to be taught us. Why do we not glance occasionally at what we ought to learn for ourselves? National restoration may involve a recoil pour mieux sauter (a recoil in order to leap better), but national restoration cannot take place by mere imitation of the past for the strength gathered in that past we have now to find new applications. Are the old industries dead? Then, with the craft-dexterity and wisdom which they bred in us, let us invent new industries. The women's occupations are vanishing curiously. The old incised clay for dishes, the old modeling for worship, the nice floor-ornaments for the threshold, are less and less needed. But the power that produced these things is still there. Let it now become the mother of great Indian schools of design and sculpture. Let us open our eyes to the true ambitions. In some ages woman is admired for her ignorance and touching naiveté. In others she is equally praised for her learning. The one sentimentality is as useless as the other. Each is merely a fashion. The true question is what knowledge, what power, what self-discipline and creative impulse has the race developed in this or that direction, by each one of its children?

Empowering Women Through Education: The Vision of Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita: There is a real necessity in the present stage of women's education, for introducing varied manual occupations. A development of brain without hand, of word without deed, of thinking without power of initiation and sustained action, will prove almost entirely retrogressive. It is most undesirable that a woman should go blind, as has happened so often amongst the peasants in Venetia or in Normandy, in the effort to produce beautiful lace. Yet unless the notion of perfection for its own sake can speak to our girls through the new



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opportunities of the present, as it has in those of the past, there cannot be true education. And from such a gain even a case of blindness now and again should not deter us.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the education of women in India is a journey marked by both challenges and triumphs, complexities and clarity. It is a journey that transcends mere academic pursuits, reaching into the very fabric of societal norms and cultural identity. As we navigate this terrain, it becomes evident that empowering women through education is not merely a matter of acquiring knowledge but also of nurturing minds, fostering independence, and embracing the richness of tradition while embracing the opportunities of modernity. As we reflect on the insights gleaned from exploring the education of women in India, we are reminded of the profound interconnectedness of individual empowerment and societal progress. From the grassroots efforts of community leaders to the visionary ideals of scholars and activists, the education of women emerges as a catalyst for change, a beacon of hope in the pursuit of a more inclusive and enlightened society. As we look towards the future, let us continue to uphold the principles of equity and access in education, ensuring that every woman in India has the opportunity to fulfill her potential and contribute meaningfully to the tapestry of her community and nation. For in the education of women lies not only the promise of personal fulfillment but also the realization of a more just, prosperous, and harmonious society for all.

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