

Book Review

Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya: *Paper Lioness: Margaret Noble*.
Kolkata. Banglar Mukh, 2008. pp. 248+80. INR 700

Biprodas Bhattacharjee

In a letter of July 29, 1897, Swami Vivekananda struck a rather upbeat note. He felt that “a real lioness” was needed for his mission of nation building.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble, that “lioness” whom Vivekananda first met in London two years previously, was already a familiar Irish educator, a published author, and a passionate social activist. It stood to reason that she would be a powerful partner to retain in such a mission.

Vivekananda’s high hope in his Irish recruit, history tells us, was well placed. In a meteoric rise to fame in less than 15 years (1898-1911), Margaret Noble transformed herself from a local London intellectual to Vivekananda’s chief disciple and confidant, a close companion to Sarada Devi, a supporter of the Ramakrishna Mission, and an undisputed supporter of Indian nationalism in the early 20th century.

It is this well-established storyline that Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya vehemently disputes in the work under review. With a provocative title, Rajagopal—no stranger to courting controversy through his contrarian assertions—boldly advances the book’s central thesis: that for all her vaunted work and regal prowess, Ms. Noble, whom Swami Vivekananda named “Nivedita”, was, in effect, only a paper lioness.

Through its dense 240-page exposition, the author doggedly attempts to reduce Ms. Noble’s life from a star to that of a small-time “extra”, only marginally relevant to the story of Indian nationalism and Vivekananda’s undertakings. Ms. Noble’s larger-than-life stature, Chattopadhyaya argues, is the creation of hyperbolic

* Biprodas Bhattacharjee taught English at the Ramakrishna Vidyamandir, Narendrapur, and frequently contributes to the English dailies of Kolkata.

responses from contemporary historical figures and zealous reverence by uncritical masses. Her *actual* achievements, we are told, are decidedly pedestrian. Even Ms. Noble’s most readily accepted life credits are put to the test and swiftly evinced as unfounded illusions.

The work focuses on many areas of Ms. Noble’s life that usually go unmentioned. However, this comes at a price. Chattopadhyaya, perhaps unintentionally, ends up dwelling a bit too much on tidbits with a distinctly scandalous whiff. Like a sensational tabloid that aims to shock, the author has produced a plethora of instances about Nivedita’s life whose immediate veracity and overall relevance to his argumentative framework remains tenuous. Ms. Noble’s furtive romances with famous acquaintances, her dramatic ego clashes and wily charms, her struggles with bouts of depressions and dejections, her humiliating failures (including unsuccessfully running a girls’ school), her controversial association with Indian politicians, freedom fighters, and scientists—nothing escapes the author’s disparaging lens.

By 1892, as she gained repute as an educator, Margaret became a known face in the literary circles of intellectual England. As an up-and-coming member of the Sesame Club, a cultural hotspot, she met acclaimed personalities like the playwright George Bernard Shaw, the biologist Thomas Huxley, as well as Lady Ripon and Lady Isabel Margesson. So prolific was Ms. Noble in her writings, speeches, and literary activities that at a very young age of 25 she became the club’s secretary. In fact, when the *Irish Home Rule Bill* was being debated in the British Parliament, she spoke fearlessly in favor of it, raising eyebrows and drawing national attention.

But such history falls to the wayside in Chattopadhyaya’s assessment. Rejecting Prabrajika Shradhdhprana, Shankariprasad Basu and many well-

established scholars of repute, he claims that Ms. Noble's early accomplishments are of little importance. In fact, he is keener on digging up factoids which suggest that Ms. Noble never quite attended college. As a reader, you might find yourself asking, "so what?" Her accomplishments would shine even brighter, if that were to hold true.

Similarly, our author belittles Nivedita's services during the 1899 plague epidemic of Calcutta—which included nursing patients, cleaning rubbish, drafting preventative health measures, as well as raising awareness and funds by placing heartfelt letters of appeal in local English dailies. This is rather unjustly interpreted as an act of cunning self-promotion, a "*memsahib* in plague publicity service". By all accounts, Nivedita exemplified a free-spirited woman. Alas, we do not get to meet this force of nature in the book under review.

It's also hard to grasp why Chattopadhyaya, an accomplished scientist and a formidable scholar in his own right, would go so far in his fault-finding expedition. For instance, rather inexplicably, the author turns to 18th century practices of Physiognomy and Phrenology to evaluate Ms. Noble's character. These pseudo-scientific methods claimed that the physical appearance of a person is a reliable indicator of their inner character and nature. Despite its speculative and ill-founded nature, perpetrating dangerous social and racial prejudices as "objective truths" — the author does not see fit to exclude these from his analytical methods.

The author leaves out crucial details about Ms. Noble's life that would squarely challenge his central assumptions. For example, there is precious little in this book about Nivedita's spiritual journey after her 1898 conversion to Hinduism. Neither is there a fair acknowledgment of her enormous impact on contemporary Indian intelligentsia and on the spirit of contemporary freedom fighters. So highly regarded was she that Vivekananda's brother, Mahendra Nath Dutta, in a conversation with the Swiss scholar and biographer Raymond Lizelle, likened Nivedita to the Indian nation itself.

When Nivedita died at the age of 43, scores of followers and admirers showed up at her funeral. Among the mourners were Prafulla Chandra Roy, Jagadish Chandra

Bose and Dr Nilratan Sarkar. Our author overlooks this fact conveniently.

Surely, the book reveals original research that adds to a more holistic understanding of Sister Nivedita. The pages covering Nivedita's cordial, respectful, yet sometimes bitter, relationship with Sir Patrick Geddes, a pioneering biologist, geologist and town planner, is a good example. And yet, we see Chattopadhyaya's cynical tendencies soon return. That Ms. Noble cultivated a productive relationship with Sir Geddes, who turned his attention to India, goes unmentioned. Geddes went on to provide valuable expertise about how to build good education systems and help shape the founding of a successful university in India, funded by Jamsetji Tata. After Nivedita's death in 1911, Geddes came to India and spent much of the next decade in the subcontinent studying the processes of urbanization. Sadly, the author finds such highly relevant anecdotes extrinsic to his scope.

Structurally, the book is similar to the author's previous publication, "*KagujeySinghi: Margaret Noble*", the more exhaustive Bengali work. It is illustrated with well-known and not-so-well-known photographs and paintings. They fascinate, add value, and hold one's intrigue. But a persistent problem that remains, while the author's conclusions are unfailingly cynical and unapologetically impertinent, is that his evidence is scant and circumstantial. The book's overarching thesis, it is also worth noting, does not always sync with its underlying arguments. There is often a fundamental logical disconnect.

On the whole, Chattopadhyaya's truth-seeking mission, however well-intentioned, is marred by his lack of objectivity. Even the most innocuous of Nivedita's actions are twisted into something conniving or trivial. There is a simmering viciousness against our subject, which some readers may find disenchanting.

In this book, we find a voracious researcher with a penchant for cherry-picking facts, struggling to uphold a tenuous hypothesis whose purpose was unclear all along. We were promised a truth-seeking quest, but we end up with a lot of sophistry.