

### To The Editor, *Summerhill*

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This has reference to the review of my book '*Paper Lioness: Margaret Noble (2018)*' by Biprodas Bhattacharjee, which appeared in *Summerhill*, Winter 2020 issue. I wish to point out some misconceptions propagated in that review.

Though some people hold that the epithet "a real lioness" is to be taken literally, it is clear that its original use by Swami Vivekananda was clearly as a figure of speech or a metaphor.

About the epithet 'Irish recruit' used by the reviewer: Nivedita spent only the first 5 years of her life in Ireland; most of her formative years (1873-1897) were actually spent in England before her departure for India.

In my book, I have demonstrated that Margaret never obtained a University education even though higher education for women in England had started in 1874, ten years before she finished high school (erroneously called a college by Sankariprasad Basu in his introduction of *Letters of Sister Nivedita*). Swami Vivekananda's work in London actually benefitted most from support given by E. T. Sturdy and Frances Henrietta Muller, graduates of Oxford and Cambridge respectively.

The reviewer has misunderstood my argument in Chapter 11 titled 'Memsahib in Plague-Publicity Service.' I did not interpret her work 'as an act of cunning self-promotion' as alleged, but only stated her actual contribution during Plague Relief work in 1899. I have established that Nivedita never nursed any plague patient, **nor** cleared any rubbish herself. Swamis Sadananda, Atmananda, Nityananda and Shivananda were actually in charge of the cleaning of the slums, while Swami Vivekananda himself was overall in-charge.

In support of my doubts about Margaret's interest in spirituality, let me cite Gandhi's impressions in his first meeting with Nivedita. In his *Autobiography* he writes:

I...met her in a Chowringhee mansion. I was taken aback by the splendour that surrounded her, and even in our conversation there was not much meeting ground. I spoke to Gokhale about

this, and he said he did not wonder that there could be no point of contact between me and a volatile person like her."

Sri Biprodas has alleged: 'The author leaves out crucial details about Ms. Noble's life ... there is precious little in this book about Sister Nivedita's spiritual journey after her 1898 conversion to Hinduism.' On the contrary, April 1900 pamphlet ('The Project of the Ramakrishna School for Girls) reveals that she never gave up Christianity. Rather, she was one of three Christian members of the Order of Ramakrishna.

For assessing her true role in the Indian freedom struggle I have relied more on James C. Ker's *Political Trouble in India 1907-1917* (1917) and historians Ramesh C. Majumdar and Bimanbehari Majumdar than on Sankari Prasad Basu's *Nivedita Lokmata*. Barindrakumar Ghosh, the militant freedom fighter and Sri Aurobindo's brother, recounted her role to Lizelle Reymond in a letter of 18 August 1939:

'...she was connected...as an ardent sympathiser but not as an actual worker. To my knowledge she did not send anybody to France [for guns/explosives training]. Our society sent Hem Chandra Das to France for that purpose & Madame Cama [Cama] ...'

In my opinion, Nivedita cannot be justly called Vivekananda's chief disciple. That honour should go to people like Swamis Shuddhananda, Prakashananda, Virajananda and lay disciples like Sharat Chandra Chakrabarty. In truth, Swami Vivekananda himself was thoroughly disenchanted with Nivedita following her failures as a fund-raiser and a lecturer in the US during 1899-1900. Their personal warmth was never restored after the Paris Congress of 1900. Before his death, Swamiji relieved Nivedita of the charge of the Baghbazar girls' school, handing it over to Sister Christine.

I have placed greater emphasis on the original American newspapers reports regarding the court case brought

by Olea Bull (Sara Bull's daughter) against Nivedita. All four witnesses testified in court that Margaret had hastened Mrs. Bull's death by giving her *Makaradhvaj* for two months. Olea won the case eventually but died immediately afterwards. By the time, the courts ruled in her favour, Margaret herself had died in Calcutta. Should

we, then, idolize Margaret Noble, who was prosecuted and found guilty of man slaughter charges for hastening the death of her dear friend Sara C. Bull?

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