

From Margaret Noble to Sister Nivedita – a major ‘influencer’ in Indian education and independence

Reader 1

Introducing the personality behind the new statue near our school.

Today we want to tell you the story of a teacher who opened a school in Wimbledon, in 1892, whose statue is being erected at the corner of Lake Road and Leopold Road. Many of our girls will walk past it every day.

This statue was made in India. So, who was she? And why is her statue coming from India?

Her name was Margaret Noble. She was influenced by a visiting monk from India, and went there in the late 1890's to take monastic vows.

India was a British colony at the time.

There, she became known as Sister Nivedita, her new monastic name.

It means ‘dedicated’.

Margaret lived up to her new name. Her spiritual guru, Swami Vivekananda, asked her to open a school, and introduce formal teaching to middle class women in Calcutta. She dedicated herself to that work for the rest of her life.

She was the eldest child of Mary and Samuel Noble, and became a teacher at the age of 17. She taught in different schools around Ireland and England, to support her family, before setting up her own Ruskin school in [Warpole](#) Street Wimbledon in 1892.

She followed the principles of a German educator called Froebelⁱ, who believed that education should begin by cultivating the normal aptitude of every child for exercise, play, observation, imitation, and construction. A group of teachers in England could see the sense of this method of teaching, and they tried to put it into practice. Thus, the 'New Education' was advocated and Margaret, too, became a part of it. Soon, she became a favourite writer and speaker at the Sunday Club and the Liverpool Science Club.

A good writer and speaker, Margaret also joined the Sesame Clubⁱⁱ in London, where she met fellow writers George Bernard Shawⁱⁱⁱ and Thomas Huxley^{iv}.

The Sesame Club was a place for thinkers – and she fitted in very well.

Reader 2

So, where did the Sesame Club meet, and what did it do?

The purpose of the Sesame Club was to hold an open-minded debate about education in its broadest sense. It wasn't just about how to design or deliver a curriculum – the discussion was wide ranging.

The nearest thing we have to it today is the University Women's Club which holds a range of talks on every imaginable topic, to stimulate the interest, and share the knowledge base of members, amongst members.

The purpose of the Sesame Club was to widen the horizons of education, and give educated men and women a place to learn about teaching and learning.

Margaret met a monk from India at the Sesame Club. This monk held public classes on moral philosophy and the teachings of Vedanta at a private house in Pimlico. Vedanta is a comprehensive set of writings on the nature of life, the universe and human purpose – if you like, the broadest view of education.

What did she hear at that first meeting, which was to change her life?

The monk was called Swami Vivekananda^v.

He said: "Education is an integral part of religion and neither one nor the other should be bought nor sold."

She sat with around 15 people gathered around this monk, and thought, like them, that this was a remarkable man.

She went to all his lectures.

Reader 3

So, who was Swami Vivekananda and why did Margaret Noble follow him to India?

Swami Vivekananda was a young philosopher and visionary from Kolkata, in West Bengal, India. Just before he got to England, he had been to the World Parliament of Religions in September 1893, and spoken about a universal religion, all embracing, and tolerant.

'I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth . . .' he had said

This resonated with many people. Margaret liked what he was saying so much, that after he left, she worked for the Vedanta movement^{vi} for a while. She had been seeking what was universally true, and she felt that Vedanta was providing the answers she had been seeking.

She had learned that one of Vivekananda's main aims for India was to provide formal education for middle-class women. He said that all women, like men, could lead spiritually enriched lives, based on personally reading the ancient books, as they once had in India.

He emphasised that the women of India had long been oppressed and ignored. It was time they were given better educational opportunities. In particular they should learn English to be able to read the newspapers and go on to higher education, and take the bigger part in running the home.

He had asked Margaret to take on the challenge of introducing formal schooling for women.

She was drawn to this work, being warned by her mentor that the work would mostly be uphill, and there was likely to be little or no financial provision for it.

She sailed for India, knowing that she was signing up for hard work.

Reader 4

What happened when she got to India?

When she arrived in India in 1898, the first thing she did was to take the vows of a novice in the Religious Order of Sri Ramakrishna. Her mentor and spiritual guide was Swami Vivekananda.

Her first project was to set up a school^{vii}, which she did.

Middle class families were reluctant to let their daughters go to school, preferring governesses and individual tuition.

She went to collect each of them at their homes, and brought them back herself. There was only a handful of girls at the start.

It was a very long day for Margaret, and many did not or could not afford to pay.

Margaret started to learn about India

At the same time, she started learning about Indian mythology and culture and read first-hand translations of the epics.

She was much impressed. She had learned before that India was not ready to be given independence, but she could see that this was not an inferior culture.

She ran out of money for her school in a while, and had to return to England to raise further funds.

Her friends noticed and commented on her changing views.

Many people in the UK at the time admired her.

Reader 5

She wanted an Independent India

After Vivekananda's death in 1902 Nivedita cut off her formal connection with the Ramakrishna movement, which banned involvement in political activity, and started helping those fighting for Indian independence.

The most important way in which she helped was to explain to the freedom fighters the underlying meaning of the official documentation issued by the British Raj. She would 'think aloud' in their presence, no more, but they found her musings truly helpful. She would explain the sub-text of issued rules and other documentation. The freedom fighters found her thoughts invaluable. She would encourage and exhort, and give the freedom fighters confidence.

Not that she wanted to be far removed from the monks and their spiritual efforts. But in this country her efforts would properly be seen as being ever the 'good Christian'. She wrote encouragingly to the youth of India – you are indeed from a cultured and spiritually strong country – take action. She lectured all over India, encouragingly, bringing all of her intellect to bear.

There was no underlying conflict however. The teachings of the Ramakrishna order explicitly say that all religions are true. And everyone contributing to her work from the UK and America could see that her Christian roots were bound to have a bearing on how she lived, and what she considered kind and just. She was after all the daughter of a cleric.

She was cordially received by the brother disciples of her master. Nobody minded, and everyone silently encouraged her work.

The spiritual mother of this order of monks^{viii} held her in great affection, and spoke highly of her dedication and work.

But she remained first and foremost, a teacher

Sister Nivedita re-launched her school after her guru's passing, which was expanded to include classes for married women, and promoted traditional Indian art and architecture.

While the British rulers of India were establishing a curriculum of Western Art and Culture, Margaret collaborated with Ernest Havell, Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta from 1896 to 1905, who developed a style of art and art education based on Indian rather than western models. This is what was taught in the Nivedita School.

She collected Indian myths and stories, and wrote a book herself called 'Cradle Tales of Hinduism', amongst many others. She wanted everyone to know that India had her own art, culture and heritage, and it was more ancient than that of the West.

Reader 6

Helping the Arts and the Sciences

She helped Indian scientists who were doing important work, and not getting recognition for it.

Jagadish Chandra Bose^{ix} was the most important of these scientists. He was, through her efforts eventually knighted by the British for his contributions to science in many fields. He was a true polymath – writing science fiction, inventing equipment, and working in physics and mathematics.

Bose has been named by Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers as one of the fathers of radio science.

Margaret's health was broken by hard work, very quickly. Immensely valued as Sister Nivedita, she died in 1911 in Darjeeling, in India.

Her guru, and mentor, Swami Vivekananda blessed her:

“Be thou to India's future sons, the mistress,
servant, friend in one.”

She was indeed.

Reader 7

What three important lessons can we all learn from the Life of Margaret Noble?

1) That a woman working in a spirit of service can make a huge difference to society, and also the political life of a nation.

2) That 'not to give up' is a really good quality to cultivate. Her whole life is an example of the old saying: ***when the going gets tough, the tough get going***.

3) That a strong faith and a high ideal can be the most effective motivating factors in the life of anyone – man or woman.

In India she is still very highly regarded – her 150th birth anniversary in 2016 was celebrated by many schools named after her.

The Economic Times of India covered^x her 150th birth anniversary celebrations as well. They know that what she did, quietly and consistently, because she believed she was doing the right thing, still resonates in India.

If we all remember what she lived for as we walk past her statue, and take heart from her lived experience, then we'll make sure that she is still changing lives here in England as well.

That is why India is sending a statue of Margaret Noble – their own dedicated Sister Nivedita – to stand in Wimbledon as a witness of the gift for India which she turned out to be.

Wimbledon acknowledges^{xi} her significance.

It all started while she was living and working in Wimbledon.

Reader 8

Margaret Noble was a remarkable woman of her time – and should be remembered as such.

If you Google women in the 19th century, we still see at the top of the results a list of women who were renowned for their beauty. Women are seen still through the lens of the male gaze.

But some are remembered for their work, and honoured for it.

In 1883, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson^{xii}, a physician and a political activist, who had to fight for her status as a physician, was appointed Dean of the London School of Medicine for Women, which she had helped to found in 1874, and oversaw its expansion. Margaret would have known of her work.

In 1903 Marie Curie got the Nobel Prize in Physics, and we recall her with pride.

By 1905 Christabel Pankhurst^{xiii} and Annie Kenney stormed into a political meeting in Manchester and asked two Liberal politicians (Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Grey) whether or not they believe women should be allowed to vote. Nivedita did not approve of their violent methods, but clearly supported the aims of the Suffragettes. We see this from her many letters to friends.

Today, a statue of Emmeline Pankhurst stands in the gardens just outside the House of Lords.

All these women, and many others including writers and artists are remembered with respect.

Somehow, we seem to have forgotten to honour Margaret Noble.

She worked tirelessly for many causes which came to fruition.

We know that Margaret would have liked to be remembered for her work.

It is time that we did so.

References:

ⁱ Froebel – how his work carries on today – after Nivedita's time.

<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/learning-development-froebel-trusted-ways>

ⁱⁱ The papers of the Sesame Club are held in the archives in Hampshire – a record card showing what is held is shown at this link.

[Record card](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography sets out an account of Shaw's life and works.

[Here is a link to it.](#)

^{iv} Thomas Huxley was a zoologist – who believed in a liberal education, and people being respected for merit rather than their beliefs – Nivedita met him at the Sesame club. These were some of the attitudes she took to India.

Here is a short video on why he is a hero, for one of today's zoologists – at [the University of Manchester](#).

^v Swami Vivekananda – Margaret Noble was given a new name – Sister Nivedita – as she took on the vows of the monks inspired by Sri Ramakrishna, and recently set up by her mentor. When asked to write a biography of her guru, Margaret wrote instead a book which she called [The Master as I saw him](#).

In the note to Western Readers she describes who was this mentor who moved her to make her long journey to India, and what he taught about religion.

^{vi} Vedanta is a philosophy. There are many Vedanta Centres of the kind that Margaret Noble describes. Today, there is a Vedanta Centre in the UK. [This is how it describes what is vedanta.](#)

^{vii} Nivedita schools are many in number – [here is the website](#) for the one she set up in Kolkata.

^{viii} The mother of this order of monks was called Sarada Devi. Wikipedia gives a reasonable short account of her life – [here is the link](#) to the relevant page.

^{ix} Jagadish Chandra Bose was a multi- talented person – a polymath. Here is how he is listed in the Open University pages called [Making Britain – How South Asians shaped the Nation – 1870-1950](#)

^x Economic Times of India's article on Nivedita – [here is the link to it](#)

^{xi} The Wimbledon Society sees [Margaret Noble as a significant person](#) who is a part of local history and heritage

^{xii} Elizabeth G Anderson, the first Englishwoman to qualify as a doctor, was a contemporary of Margaret Noble – [here is more information about her life and work](#).

^{xiii} Christabel Pankhurst was one of the suffragettes celebrated by women writers – here is an interview with a biographer of this woman, who talks about what she did and why she did it. The [Museum of London](#) had an exhibition of this a while ago.