

# EMPOWERMENT OF ASIAN WOMEN AS ENVISAGED BY SISTER NIVEDITA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper emphasizes the relevance and importance of empowerment as defined by Sister Nivedita. Sister Nivedita was one of the foremost personalities in the galaxy of twentieth century revivalists in India. Her legacy of works and articles which she has left behind give an insight into the pursuit of truth. According to Sister Nivedita, the formation of character along with modern knowledge is the true empowerment of Asian women. Such an ideally empowered woman will have an absolute freedom of thought, speech and action which makes finer homes and also contribute to the National and civic life. In the current scenario, Asian women have ample opportunities to acquire modern knowledge through various means. But what needs more emphasis is on powerful exposure to national ideals of womanhood as expressed in our ancient history and literature. It is these ideals which directs women to realize their latent power and deep rooted character which is conspicuous by its absence. So present-day education should strive for the re-orientation of modern Asian women to the ancient Asian ideals of the women hood. Keywords: Empowerment, civic life, Asian ideals, woma*

## INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades women empowerment has been one of the prime concepts of discussion in the overall development of a nation. The word empowerment has been defined in different context by various thinkers such as ability to make a choice, as a power to achieve desired goals but not a power over others, capacity for leading a fulfilling human life, a way of bringing gender equality and a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation in decision making and control over one's own life and so on. Thousands of years of simplicity and patience, like that of the peasant, like that of the grass, have spoken in the beautiful rite. It is this patience of woman that makes civilizations. It is this patience of woman that makes the nationality of a country. Sister Nivedita believes that every woman is possessed with an inner potential. Since ages this potential of many women was suppressed due to the typical beliefs followed by the society which created a hindrance in their freedom of thought and expression. Due to which eventually we tend to believe that women are incapable to contribute in social, political and economic development of a nation. According to Sister Nivedita, rekindling the hidden inner potential of every disempowered women and transforming them with highest ideals, thoughts and action is the real empowerment of women. This can be achieved through Education which is a powerful tool and will act as a facilitator in empowering women.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have been undertaken on women empowerment at the global level and in India. Some studies dealt on methodological issues, some on empirical analysis and some others on the measures and tools of empowerment. In this section some of the important studies and analysis on women empowerment is studied.

Dr. Rajeshwari Shettar [1] studied the issues and challenges faced by women in India. This paper finds the necessity for empowering and the factors influencing the growth of women empowerment. The paper points at the society to take the initiative in creating an atmosphere of no gender

discrimination and women to have full opportunities in participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality.

Prahlad Kumar and Tinku Paul [2] explored the real concept of empowerment, its policy and implications. A detailed study of working and non-working women in the rural area has been done in terms of magnitude of autonomy in decision making. They found that 56% of working women can take independent decisions in different scenarios whereas only 36% of non-working women did not have this independence. They conclude by saying without women's individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in their own interests, resources cannot bring about empowerment. It can only act as an external apparatus.

Sara Pavanello, Pamela Pozarny and Ana Paula de la O Campos [3] performed a Qualitative research on women's economic empowerment and social protection. The research aimed at gaining a better understanding of how social protection policies and programmes can be improved in order to enhance impacts on rural women's empowerment. They also aimed at identifying ways in which social protection schemes or systems can be strengthened with regard to reducing gender inequalities and improving rural women's economic and social empowerment, actions which can lead to more sustainable pathways out of poverty. The paper emphasized that a woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability and the power to make and act on economic decisions by: succeeding and advancing economically; and ii) having the power and agency to benefit from economic activities.

Esther Duflo in [4] says that Women's empowerment and economic development are closely related. While development itself will bring about women's empowerment, empowering women will bring about changes in decision-making, which will have a direct impact on development. Women's empowerment also leads to improvement in children's health, nutrition and educational welfare. This paper reviews the evidence on both sides of the empowerment-

development relationship and concludes that neither economic development nor women's empowerment is the magic bullet it is sometimes made out to be. Equity between men and women is only likely to be achieved by continuing policy actions that favor women at the expense of men, possibly for a very long time. While this may result in some collateral benefits, those benefits may or may not be sufficient to compensate the cost of the distortions associated with such redistribution.

Manisha Desai [5] addresses the conceptual and methodological issues related to women's empowerment, the trends in women's empowerment over the last 20 years in key areas such as education, health, economic and political participation. They found that Violence against women and HIV/AIDS are two important factors that prevent the well being of women. Hence they Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan of South Asia; Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam of South East Asia. The study found that deep seated traditions, social and religious norms hinder women's agency. Improvement of resources such as better access to quality education, economic participation, favorable labor laws, inheritance and property rights are essential for continued progress in women's empowerment.

Shobana Nelasco [7] attempted to make a comparative study on women empowerment in seven South Asian countries. This comparison was done effectively by using few indices like Gender Related Development index, Gender empowerment measure, Gender inequality in Education, Gender Inequality in Economic activity, Political Empowerment Measure etc. The overall analysis brought a conclusion that South Asia is a region that need special attention from the world and international agencies for its gender empowerment and human development as they are ranked beyond 134 Rank in Human Development Index and are placed beyond 98th rank in case of Gender Development Index except in case of Sri lanka and Maldives where there are continuous crisis.

Purusottam Nayak and Bidisha Mahanta [8] made an attempt to analyse the status of women empowerment in India using various indicators based on data from secondary sources. The study

came up with some best practices for organizing women's movement at the local level, national and transnational levels. The author also studied on some of the most successful social policies that have improved education and health outcomes which are based on various conditional cash and asset transfer policies.

Sanjukta Chaudhuri [6] made a comparative analysis on women's empowerment. She worked on multivariate regression analysis to explore the time and birth cohort trends of women's empowerment in eight countries of South Asia and South East Asia. The measures of women's empowerment are: economic participation, educational attainment, wage work, fertility, female to male sex ratio of living children, and the ideal female to male sex ratio. The countries included are

revealed that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by government. Gender gap exists regarding access to education and employment. The study concludes by an observation that access to education and employment are only the enabling factors to empowerment, achievement towards the goal, however, depends largely on the attitude of the people towards gender equality.

## **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES BY SISTER NIVEDITA**

In the West, Margaret (Sister Nivedita) at her 20s worked with poverty struck women in Rugby orphanage and with mining working class families in Wrexham where she trained, supported and guided them to live their life according to the ideal of their faith. Later when she found her electrifying Master Swami Vivekananda, she decided to serve to fulfil his vision of empowering Indian women.

Some of her Observations in India:

India is the land of great women. Wherever we turn, whether to history or literature, we are met on every hand by those figures, whose strength

she mothered and recognized, while she keeps their memory eternally sacred.

The coherence and social unity which the west has lost remains still intact in the East.

In India, the cowhouse, the dairy, the kitchen, the granary, the chapel, with numerous other offices, divides the day-long attentions of the ladies of the family.

The only place in the world which combines a high degree of civilization with the complete elimination of any form of slavery was the orthodox hindu household.

The Bengali wife worships her husband, and serves her children and her household with all the rapt idealism of the saints.

The women of Maharashtra are as strong and as actual as any of the West.

The Rajputani queen prides herself on the unflinching courage of her race, that would follow her husband even into the funeral fire, yet will not permit a king to name his wife as amongst his subjects.

The woman of Madras struggles with agony to reach the spiritual pole star.

The daughters of Gujarat are, like the women of merchant peoples everywhere, soft and silken and flower like, dainty and clinging as a dream.

In the Moslem zenana, one can find the same graceful Indian womanhood, sometimes in clad in the sari, sometimes in the short Turkish jacket, but always the self- same gentle and beautiful wifehood and motherhood.

Brynhildr was not heroic than thousands of whom the Rajput chronicles tell.

Joan of Arc was not more a patriot than Chand Bibi or the wonderful Queen of Jhansi.

The ideal achievements of Hindu womanhood are likewise of wisdom and service and renunciation, rather than of power and love.

The foster-mother of Khadijah, the mother of Jesus, the wife of Prophet, Khadijah and his daughter Fatima, are the true exemplars of the Moslem woman.

The religion of the wife lies in serving her husband; the religion of the widow lies in serving

God. There is no doubt that the in their minds that the widow's call is the higher of the two.

Eastern woman is unaware of any defiance of institutions. She is the product of an ethical civilization.

Eastern woman vows and penances are unknown even to her husband; but were they told they would scarcely excite remark in a community where all make similar sacrifices.

Eastern woman is more deeply self-effacing and more interestingly altruistic than any Western.

The quiet silent lives of Asian women, living in their homeslike Tapasvinis, proud only to be faithful, ambitious only to be perfect, have done more to preserve Dharma and cause it to flourish, than any battles that have been fought outside. Throughout the world women are the guardians of humanity's ethical ideals.

Truly the East is eternally the mother of religions, for the reason that she has assimilated the duty of officialism or the message of the Church, and to those who deeply understand it may well seem that Christianity in Europe is neither more nor less than the mission of the Asiatic life.

Based on the above observations and examinations of the facts, she realized that these women are highly grounded to their cultural roots. By schooling them, they can transform to a real empowered women. Hence Nivedita created her own 'ideals' and 'thoughts' which are the dynamic elements in creating any social evolution. Based on the data collected from experience, she scrutinized, classified and then drawn conclusions to formulate

her own theories. India was for her the workspace to study the status, growth and development of women.

**IDEALS AND IDEAS**

Nivedita believed “Any new movement is always based on the Ideal behind it and not the form. Forms create themselves. It’s the ideal which drives the movement. By one’s own vision of the ideal and by one’s own struggle to reach its height is the only way one really raises and by no other means.”

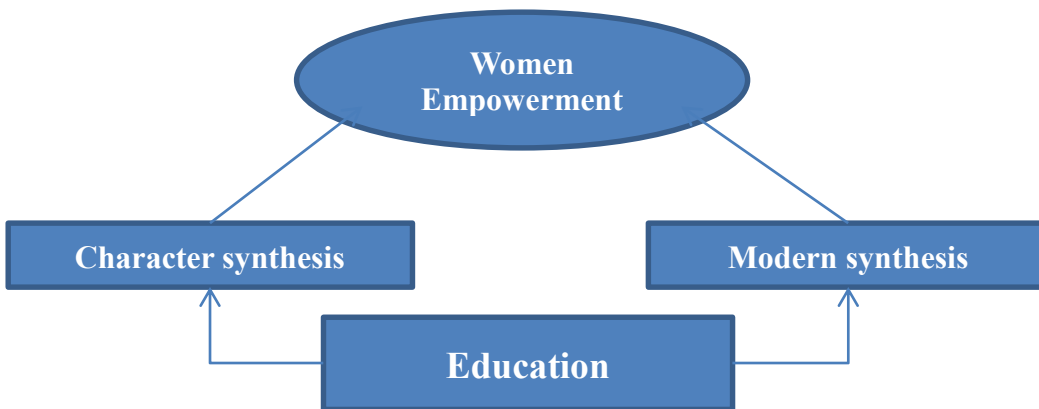


Fig 1 Women Empowerment process

Nivedita realizes in building upon a great new order of intellectual development of women. She discerns that the mind of women has to manifest powerfully and deeply; women has to be skilled in problem solving abilities. Humanity is only complete in the two-fold organ, when feminine mind is united with the masculine. Hence Nivedita started with a movement of empowering women with an ideal of amalgamation of character formation and modern knowledge. This ideal can be achieved effectively through Education.

**EMPOWERING THROUGH EDUCATION**

What education did Nivedita meant? Firstly it is clear that the objective of the old education of Indian women lay in character, hence the new one cannot aim lower. So the education of an Indian girl should be directed towards making her a more truly Indian woman. She must be enabled by it to recognize for herself what are the Indian ideals and how to achieve them. This concept of understanding the history of her own country and realizing her role and responsibility in achieving the highest ideals of her nation is relevant and can be widely extended to other Asian countries as well. Therefore character synthesis makes a girl feel as a

true Nationalist and nationalistic ideals can be achieved through modern synthesis [9].

**CHARACTER SYNTHESIS**

What is it to teach our girls? What do they have to be? What do they have to avoid?

First and foremost, we must root them in their own past. It is a noble past that makes a noble future. They have to be given with discriminating eye and the testing heart. They must see the blank spaces of need and they must recognise the noble intention. They must feel the pride that says “It was my forefathers, who did this.” Every woman must be given their own color. Never will there be a requirement of pale imitations of American or English women. What is required on the contrary is a womanhood that can contribute something to the circle, which would otherwise have lacked it. For this one must be convinced of their nationness. In her heart, her conscience, her intellect, and her will, that she is nationalist indeed, and not a foreigner. What type of woman she must admire? It has to be Padmini of Cheetore, Chand Bibi, Jhansi Rani, Qui Jin, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and many such great souls who lived their life with an exemplary character and will ever remain as an iconic

representation for women. If Sati and Savitri are ever to be born of Indian mothers, they have to be suited to the requirements of modern age. Gandhari must live again, with new names to think of, but with all the ancient faith and courage, steadfastness and sacrifice. Damayanti must return and Draupadi, fit wife for Yudishtira, king of justice![10]

It may be that women are called only to silence and thought. Then let this silence be dynamic, let the thought be prayer. Let the quiet shelter the idea of a nation, 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. A nation wants both – woman, the mother, to keep the faith; man, the child, to fight its battles. Nivedita in her writings finally questions, “Shall we after centuries of an Indian womanhood, fashioned on the pattern of Sita, of Savitri, of Rani Ahalya Bai, descend to the creation of coquettes and divorcees? Shall the Indian Padmini be succeeded by the Greek Helen?”

Therefore new learning must add to the old gravity and wisdom, without taking from the ancient holiness. [11] Hence to work, suffer, and 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.

### **MODERN SYNTHESIS**

Reading and writing are not in themselves education. The power to use them well is vastly more important than the things themselves. 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. So it is not by teaching a Bengali girl French, or the piano, but by enabling her to think about her nation, and to become one with whom the world’s greatest minds are proud to

be associated with, is the ultimate aim of acquiring modern knowledge.

Scientific standards, geographical conceptions, historical pre-possessions, these are the three characteristics of the modern mind which women must procure. A world sense; a time sense; and a feeling for the fact in itself; these are the things that makes up modern conception. In order to understand these facts, and weigh them well, it is clear that a good deal of intellectual preparation is necessary. This intellectual training in what is usually termed as education but it is the sense of responsibility of woman that constitutes the true education leading to advanced knowledge. This new knowledge will now modify every action of women. Before yielding blindly to prejudice, she will now consider the direction in which that prejudice is working.

Before women travel to foreign countries to master in science and technology she must first acquire the methods of science of her own nation. Then in the light of these methods she will learn all that her country would have taught her in its simple and primitive Swadeshi form. Once she becomes aware of the gap between the two, having read and experimented in so far as possible, now she can be sent out. Only when curiosity is already awakened, one has the energy to proceed from known to the unknown [12].

Westernization and modernization are two ideologies that are always under misconception. Modernization consists of “industrialization; urbanization; increasing levels of literacy, education, wealth, and social mobilization; and more complex and diverse occupational structures.” This means that in order for a country to be more modernized, one must look to upgrade their technology, form of communication, production levels, etc. The Industrial Revolution is the perfect example of modernity. Westernization is more related to practices, religion and cultural changes. We must look into modernizing our existing systems for the betterment of the nation rather than imitating the western practices and losing our cultural values.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Ideals are mere words if they are not applied practically. Ideals become living only when they are actualized. Sister Nivedita did not end up with talking or writing about her principles of empowerment. In fact, she spoke about them only after deep study and hard practical work, both in England and in India. Hence through her tiny school she implemented all her principles. Her main objective was to offer education which is centered on devotion of God, love of Mother and adherence to morality. As a preparatory effort before starting the school, Nivedita was taken on a long tour of northern India by her Guru. She framed her action plan for her school from this study and framed such that the beliefs, practices and customs of the society were not violated but rather be strengthened by it. She realized that school and home must act and react upon each other in an ideal system of education. They must not represent different and antagonistic worlds, but separate elements in a single complex whole. The one must illuminate and explain the other.

Towards this purpose Nivedita decided to give a prominent place to the national epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata in her scheme of education. In order to teach her pupils to stand on their own feet and face life boldly, she decided to introduce activities like needlework and sewing. Bearing in mind the principles of education she had learnt in the Pestalozzian system of education, Nivedita introduced what she considered was necessary for the Hindu girls. During the prayer, which was the first activity of the day's work, along with Bengali songs, Sanskrit shlokas were recited and Vande Mataram was sung. Depending on the age of the girls she taught the Bengali language, English, history, geography and arithmetic, girls were taught sewing, knitting, needlework, clay-modelling, painting and paper cutting. Nivedita herself taught them skipping, drilling and games. She thus taught them also to give up fear and come out of unnecessary shyness and reserve and enjoy themselves. Drawing floral designs and alpana being common custom around, she introduced it in school as well. The girls also had an opportunity to do Pooja. In this way she created a homely atmosphere in the school which became a centre of joy and freedom for the children [12].

## **RELEVANCE OF NIVEDITA'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES**

It is not only India, but the whole world as a whole, is being agitated today by the question of the future of Woman. In India, discussion centres on her right to education; in Europe, it centres on her right to political expression. Currently due to the misinterpretation of westernization as modernization, Asian women are deviating from their eastern roots which lead to westernized thoughts resulting in lack of character formation and subsequent decline in acquiring actual modern knowledge. The brilliancy of Nivedita's empowerment principles is the modern approach of ancient ideals and exposure to advanced practical knowledge. Sister Nivedita's phenomenon of empowerment can be termed as modernized empowerment system which can be experimented and analyzed in other Asian countries as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

“Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased: where they are dishonored, religious act become of no avail.” The life of a woman is a poem of the soil. In all lands, holiness and strength are the treasures which the race places in the hands of women to preserve rather than in those of man. Simplicity and patience are the strength of women which determines the character of home. She is the real architect in building the home with mere culture and tradition. Thus empowerment of women transcends her thought process into a new dimension where her service will not be restricted only to her family rather widening it beyond society and in turn nation. Noble and efficient will is the goal of real empowerment. By offering national empowerment to a handful of girls, Sister Nivedita has given new life to the entire nation. By defining empowerment through educational principles, she has produced a basic pattern of literature on empowerment that will serve the future generations of the nation. Undoubtedly any nation will stand in its true position if a single generation of its women is trained in the system of empowerment as Sister Nivedita envisioned. “When Women empowers the nation empowers!”

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