

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

SAMUEL RATCLIFFE: A FRIEND OF SISTER NIVEDITA

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It is exactly a hundred years that two individuals in their thirties—an Irish lady and an Englishman—changed the approach of the most well-known newspaper, *The Statesman*, which I believe, had a tremendous impact on Indian nationalism and revolutionary movements of the first decade of the 20th century.

Nivedita, popularly known as Sister Nivedita, was born on 28 October 1867 as Margaret Elizabeth Noble at Dungannon, Ireland. Later she became well known as a disciple of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). She pioneered women's education in India, embraced the life of renunciation and worked tirelessly for uplifting women in the British-ruled India. What is now forgotten is that she was a prolific writer and excellent orator in spite of being dedicated in her own way to the ideals of the Ramakrishna Order. She was also a great source of inspiration to the Bengal revolutionaries and nationalist leaders during the first decade of the 20th century.

Samuel K. Ratcliffe (1868-1958), the radical journalist, on the other hand, was acting editor and editor of *The Statesman* from 1902 to 1907. He joined *The Statesman*, known as the mouthpiece of the British Government, in May 1902 as its assistant editor under Paul Knight and became the acting editor in 1903 when Knight left for England. He continued to serve the paper till 1907 when he was forced to resign for espousing Indian nationalism. Ratcliffe was no doubt an idealist young man, but his attitude towards India and her people had undergone an amazing metamorphosis after he came into contact with Sister Nivedita and they became lifelong friends.

Ratcliffe first met Nivedita in August 1902 at a tea party in the house of a European lady at Loudon Street, Calcutta.¹ Nivedita was then passing through a phase of mourning after the untimely death of Swami Vivekananda on 4 July 1902. At the tea party many Europeans and Indians (mostly anglicized Brahmos) were present. Nivedita, then a well-known orator, was requested to say something and she spoke briefly on the idealism of Indian women. Ratcliffe was so impressed with her speech that he later wrote, 'this was the most memorable experience of my few months' stay in India'. Indeed, it was beyond the imagination of Ratcliffe that a Westerner could praise the ideals and customs of Indian people so highly in the presence of the Anglophiles and condemn the abject ignorance of the ruling class in this matter. Naturally, both Ratcliffe and his wife became Nivedita's admirers and close friends.

The biographer of Nivedita, Pravrajika Atmaprana, writes: The "House of Sisters" as 17 Bosepara Lane was then called 'became known to many not only as a school but as "a centre of unflinching friendliness and succour". The editor of *The Statesman*, Mr. S. K. Ratcliffe and his wife cycled down from Chowringhee every Sunday morning for breakfast.' And Ratcliffe later wrote:

The Sundays in Bosepara Lane were a refreshment and a stimulus the memory of which is never likely to pass away. Breakfast was served with the extreme simplicity on the little verandah, and the group would not break up until long after the morning sun had become too hot for a comfortable journey back through the blazing streets. Her house was a wonderful rendezvous. Not often did one meet a Western visitor, save at those times when an English or American friend would be making a stay in Calcutta; but nowhere else, so far as experience went, was there an opportunity of making acquaintance with so many interesting types of the Indian world. There would come members of Council and leaders in the public affairs of Bengal; Indian artists, men of letters, men of science; orators, teachers, journalists, students The experience was beyond expression delightful, and its influence, you know, was to be felt along many lines.²

Nivedita, on her part, used to contribute regularly articles to The Statesman, often without her name, and influenced Ratcliffe to change the approach of the paper. Ratcliffe also quite often sought Nivedita's guidance and information about the revolutionaries including Sri Aurobindo and Sri Bhupendra Nath Datta (younger brother of Swami Vivekananda) and others. Slowly he turned out to be a supporter of Indian nationalist movement. From time to time Nivedita also explained to him Swami Vivekananda's concepts and visions of future India.

A month after their formal introduction, Nivedita wrote to Ratcliffe—'But you have not yet prepared yourself for India. India will make you something great. I don't know what is that. But that is inherent in you.' The above lines show Ratcliffe was changing, though in Nivedita's consideration, the change was not yet adequate. However, it is difficult to comprehend how a lady in her mid-thirties was writing to the editor of the most well-known newspaper of the time almost like a teacher! The truth nevertheless was that by 1902 Nivedita had completed her five long years' stay in Calcutta and became some kind of a celebrity by establishing a girls' school and giving lectures at different places. She had had also the experience of a long trip to Europe with Swami Vivekananda and others.

Ratcliffe's pro-Indian outlook got ready appreciation from Indian nationalist leaders and liberal Englishmen. On 2 February 1906, The Statesman itself published that it 'has always been ably conducted and its tone as first class liberal paper has always been of high order. Its present editor Mr. Ratcliffe was specially selected by the Government for a fellowship of the Calcutta University, and there is no journalist more careful than he is, while fearless and outspoken in honest criticism to keep within the four corners of journalistic propriety and fair play'.

When Ratcliffe left India for a holiday to England in 1905, Nivedita wrote to Mr and Mrs Ratcliffe at the end of her long letter:

'I must stop, only remember that you come back to a world of love and gratitude and approval that feels itself to be only a part of what you both deserve.' Why this appreciation and gratitude? Because, Ratcliffe not only cared about the Indians, but as a conscientious editor of The Statesman he also fought for them with his pen. Nivedita's inspiration, however, was not the only reason behind his radical stance. He was, in fact, a great exception amongst Englishmen of his time. Unfortunately, there was never a proper evaluation of his contribution to Indian nationalistic movements.

Ratcliffe came back to India after holidaying in England and resumed his official responsibilities. It is not too difficult to imagine how his friends rejoiced to see him again in their midst! However, The Statesman's management did not like Ratcliffe's sympathetic attitude towards Indians. And this disapproval turned into bitterness when British rulers, specially Lord Curzon began to pull the strings. A relentless attack was mounted on The Statesman to remove Ratcliffe from his post. Calcutta Police also filed a case of defamation against The Statesman and demanded a compensation of Rs. 20,000 only to intensify pressure on the management. The Calcutta High Court, however, dismissed the suit and The Statesman headlined on 23 April 1907—'POLICE LIBEL ACTION CASE AGAINST THE STATESMAN WITHDRAWN. JOINT SUIT DECLARED ILLEGAL.' Though it was a personal triumph of Ratcliffe, The Statesman management nonetheless was unhappy and asked Ratcliffe to resign.

On 19 May 1907, Ratcliffe wrote a personal letter to Nivedita that he was seeking legal advice from solicitors about his forced resignation. This amply proves how much trust Ratcliffe had in Sister Nivedita. Finally, however, Ratcliffe lost the battle.

Nivedita felt her friend's problems and immediately swung into action. She wrote to Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the topmost Congress leader, for an assignment for Ratcliffe as she had heard from him that a newspaper was going to be published from Bombay. Nivedita desperately wanted Ratcliffe to remain in India. Finally Gokhale found an assignment for Ratcliffe but the latter declined the offer for health reasons. He wanted to leave India because he felt frustrated after his forced resignation. He also

realized perhaps that his moral standpoint, shaped to a great extent by Nivedita, will never be appreciated by the British ruling clique.

So Samuel and his wife Kay Ratcliffe whom she married in December 1902, just after joining *The Statesman*, left India. We can easily guess how deeply Nivedita felt for Ratcliffe. Didn't she write to her close friend Josephine MacLeod on 14 June 1906 that 'Ratcliffe is like an angel for India. As *The Statesman* editor he helped us a lot to achieve our goal.'?

The first victim of Bengal nationalist revolution was an eighteen-year-old boy, Khudiram Bose, who was hanged on 12 August 1908 after a short trial of three months. During that turbulent situation, Ratcliffe, inspired by Nivedita, did exactly what was possible for him to do.

After the hanging of Khudiram and others between 1908 and 1909, Nivedita was an anguished lady. She wrote to the Ratcliffes on 3 November 1909: 'A new series of arrests have been made within the last few years—on the score of dacoity—and it seems as if we may be in for a new and prolonged trial on the Alipore scale. Much of it sounds obviously got up by police, who are innumerable, and must be fed!'³

In her letter to Ratcliffe on 21 November 1909, Nivedita praised his article on Indian Labour unrest and requested him to cover the Railway workers' strikes. That was the period when the British rulers had unleashed brutal and oppressive actions to counteract the firebrand nationalist revolutionaries, especially in Bengal. These letters of Nivedita prove that Ratcliffe did not lose interest in Indian affairs even after his unsavoury departure from India. Nivedita knew this. So she wrote several letters apprising him of what was happening in India.

Sister Nivedita was brought up in England, but she was an Irish and was a hater of British rule. But this never stood in the way of her friendship with the Ratcliffe couple. Ratcliffe also was appreciative of the Irish fire inside Nivedita. After Ratcliffe's departure from India, they were always in close contact. During Nivedita's trip to USA and England in 1907 and 1910 Ratcliffe met her. He was happy at her unexpected arrival. But did they know that this was their last meeting? Possibly not. But truly it was their last meeting because Nivedita returned to India on 7 April 1911 and on the morning of October 13 her 'frail boat' sank in Darjeeling when 'a ray of sunlight came streaming into the room'. Thus ended a wonderful saga of friendship between Nivedita and Ratcliffe—the friendship between two intellectuals, writers and orators, the friendship that grew out of a mutual admiration of a common bond of support for Indian nationalism.

Ratcliffe's fight for India did not end with Nivedita's death. He tried his best to publish Nivedita's writings long after her death. Even when Nivedita was alive and wrote her magnum opus, *The Master As I Saw Him*, Ratcliffe read the proofs of the book. That was as much an expression of admiration for Nivedita as for her hero—Swami Vivekananda. In 1937, twenty-seven years after Nivedita's death, he gave excellent cooperation to Lizelle Reymond who wrote the complete biography of Nivedita.

It is noteworthy that Nivedita got a derogatory obituary in *The Statesman* and Ratcliffe was the first to oppose it. He wrote in the *Daily News*, London, on 27 October 1911: 'No Englishwoman has ever made for herself a similar place in the affection of Indian people, or has tried to do the work to which she put her hand.'⁴ He also wrote in several newspapers in England, including the *Daily News*, about Sister Nivedita's work.

Ratcliffe paid his tributes to the abiding friendship with Nivedita with the help of the following lines. He writes:

Those to whom she gave the ennobling gift of her friendship knew her as the most perfect of comrades, while they hold the memory of that gift as this world's highest benediction. They think of her

years of sustained and intense endeavour, of her open-eyed and impassioned search for truth, of the courage that never quailed, the noble compassionate heart; they think of her tending the victims of famine and plague, or ministering day by day among the humble folk with whom her lot was cast; putting heart into the helpless and defeated, showing to the young and perplexed the star of a glowing faith and purpose, royally spending all the powers of a rich intelligence and an overflowing humanity for all who called upon her in their need. And some among them count it an honour beyond all price that they were permitted to share, in however imperfect a measure, the mind and confidence of this radiant child of God.⁵

Ratcliffe lived for nearly forty-seven years after sister Nivedita's premature death. During this period he became the most respected writer and lecturer on Indian and American affairs. He was also a good orator like Nivedita. He had written a few books, including *The Root of Violence* in 1934. He died at the age of ninety in 1958. The London Times published an obituary on 2 September 1958, saying that 'He was one of the ablest of the old type of radical journalist and a much respected writer and lecturer on Indian and American affairs. And his outstanding merit as a broadcaster was clear, animated and sincere exposition.' I am not sure if his death was ever reported in *The Statesman* which he edited for seven years! At least in '100 years of the Statesman', I have failed to see his name anywhere in print. Was this a meaningful silence, or careless negligence? No one knows.

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* An engineer by profession, the author is an admirer of Nivedita and a student of Vedanta.