Sister Nivedita: Offering of Grace

Prema Nandakumar

I COULD SIMPLY BEGIN THUS: I am writing now because of Sister Nivedita. I would be literally and metaphorically correct. It is true that Indian women have entered the worlds of knowledge in a big way because a young Irish lady dedicated herself totally at the feet of her guru to serve India. The guru was Swami Vivekananda.

When Swamiji was going around India to get a first-hand idea of the needs of his motherland, he realised that two areas cried out for immediate action: the world of dalits and the world of women. Action needed the backing of money.

Prema Nandakumar is a literary critic, translator, author, and researcher from Srirangam, Tamil Nadu.

He resolved now to go to the United States to earn funds for his work. After his speech at the Chicago Convention in 1893, he glowed like a flame atop a hill in the western world. On his way back to India, he tarried in London to give a few speeches in 1895. He may not have got the expected funds in England but he received the priceless gift of a peerless disciple, Sister Nivedita.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867–1911) was the child of an Irish family, religious and patriotic. Having received a good education, she chose the profession of a schoolteacher, and was happy to be one. Even as she taught, she kept improving herself by continuing to study, and became a good orator and journalist. She was also very much in demand as a journalist writing for *Wimbledon News*, *Daily News*, and *Review of Reviews.* Hers was an enquiring mind as she was no stranger to disappointments. Twice she had to face disillusionment in love. What is this life? Is there nothing more than living for oneself? Living seemed pointless without an aim, without an ideal. Then came the invitation to Lady Isabel Margesson's home to attend a speech by a renunciate from India.

When Margaret entered Lady Isabel's drawing room, she found a tall and well-built young man in ochre robes sitting self-lost in a chair. As the audience remained completely silent, full of expectancy, a prayer rose from Swamiji: 'Shiva, Shiva, namah Shivaya!' His listeners remained spell-bound, while Swamiji spoke in well-modulated tones using well-chosen and most appropriate words from the English language, but simple, direct and ah! so close to their heart. Margaret was all attention. She took her time to check whether her heart was responding in the right direction. She attended more lectures by Swamiji and took part in group discussions. She was a strong person, ready to face challenges and Swamiji's invitation gave her exactly that. Would she help bring education to India's marginalised masses which included Indian women as well?: 'I have been making plans for educating the women of my country. I think you could be of great help to me.'[1]

There followed a couple of years of correspondence, Swamiji patiently answered her questions. Once Margaret took a decision, there was no going back. She also firmly believed in the simple assurance given to her by her guru: 'I promise you, I will stand by you unto death ... "*The tusks of the elephant come out, but never go back*"; so are the words of a man never retracted.'[2]

She came in 1898 and was initiated by Swami Vivekananda on 25 March at Belur and became a probationer of the Order of Sri Ramakrishna, and was given the name, Nivedita. After a session of meditation and music in which the monks participated, Swamiji pointed to the opposite bank of the Ganges and said: 'Nivedita, that is where I should like to have a convent for women. Like a bird that needs two wings to fly, India must have both educated men and educated women.'[3]

This was a time when Indian women were still strangers to education and had no idea that if they could become self-supporting, the tyranny of a patriarchal society could be shown the door. After proving her grit to her guru by plunging into plague-relief in Calcutta, she opened the first school for girls in November of the same year. Among the problems were the unwillingness of the families to educate the girl child, the lack of money, and her own need to master Indian philosophical and religious literature so that she could be a worthy novitiate of the Order. So she travelled abroad to collect funds for her school; she travelled all over India to understand this continent. She found out that this was no Continent of Circe but that

of Sarasvati. Never was a moment wasted by her. Always working, reading, or writing and of course, meditating. If there was divine passion in what she wrote about Indian culture, Sri Ramakrishna, and Mother Kali, there was an unstoppable force in her services for women's education and India's freedom movement.

When the eminent scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, was subjected to racial discrimination, she boldly came to his help, rendering editorial assistance for preparing his research papers and getting sponsorships for him. And how can one gauge the depth of her services for the freedom movement of this nation! She was a highly valued friend of nationalist leaders like Bhupendranath Datta, Sri Aurobindo, and Barindra Kumar Ghose. These were heroes of the movement and naturally they admired her for her readiness to face danger. Who would not admire her who wore but a flowing robe and a garland of *rudraksha* beads and went around as a fashionable foreign lady on an errand and was not recognised even by her own friends!

All the same, Nivedita did become a suspect in the eyes of the British Raj. When Bhupendranath Datta, the editor of the nationalist paper, *Jugantar*, was arrested, she even emptied her personal coffers to raise money for his bail and helped other members of the magazine office as well. When it became known that the Raj was prepared to act against her, her nationalist friends begged her to withdraw from the field of action for a while, for their sake. She spent 1907–8 abroad. It was a much-needed change for her to rest, recuperate, take up her lecturing and journalism to an adoring public. All the time her eyes were fixed back on her Mother India which had become her land of destiny:

> She was the center of attraction at Lady Sandwich's salon. On the day she spoke of her Bagh Bazar school, Emma Calvé gave a recital. When she described her trip to the famine-stricken regions, at the Russian Embassy, people rushed there to hear her. After the Duchess of Albany suddenly decided to attend one of her meetings, the English aristocracy took her to their hearts. The women questioned her and envied her freedom. The men were flattered by the ironic wisdom of her arguments. The doors of the House of Commons were opened to her whenever Indian affairs were on the agenda. She was not wasting her time (340).

She never did. She was the apt pupil of Swami Vivekananda in this matter as well. Nivedita never wasted time in mindless conversations or looking before and after. If she had a disappointment, a shiver of frustration, or even self-pity, she never brooded on such expendable emotions. A brief note in her personal journal was enough to act as a cathartic. During these two years abroad, she visited Ireland and it was an emotional return to the country of her birth. There is an undercurrent of poignancy in Ms

Sri Aurobindo

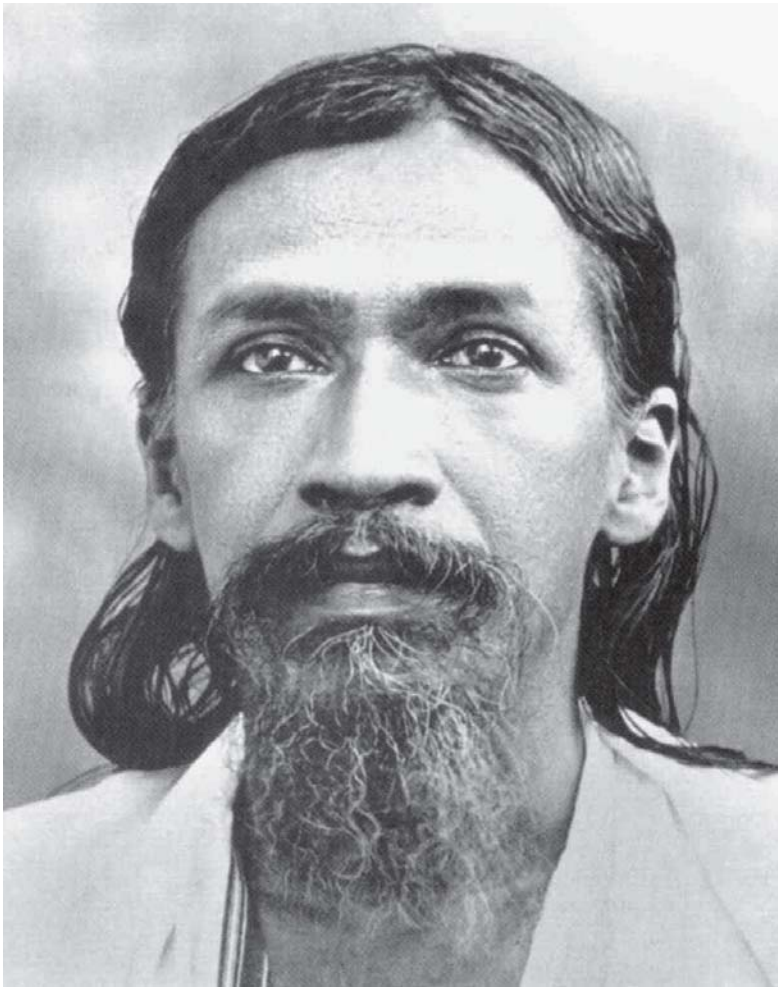

IMAGE: HTTP://CLAUDEARPI.BLOGSPOT.IN

Bhupendranath Datta (1880–1961)

Reymond's description of the scene:

> She greeted the trees, the ivy, the hedges that imprisoned the wandering night fogs. Everywhere the wind-swept ruins and the sea spray told her of perennial struggles, and of the traces of an ancient pre-Christian Aryan culture. She stopped to speak with the laborers in the fields, and heard them boasting about Ireland, with a passionate longing for liberty. Before their hardened and vigorous faces she wept over the fate of the Hindus who were so ill prepared for the struggle. Seeing this, her brother felt a pang of jealousy because Ireland had been ousted by India in her heart (341).

Sister Nivedita's travels in the US were good but she had to rush back to England. After her mother's calm passing, Nivedita returned to India and was once again drawn into helping the nationalists in a big way. When Sri Aurobindo had to go away first to Chandannagore and then to Pondicherry, she edited his *Karmayogin* with brilliant and incisive penmanship. She was certain that the spirit of Swamiji was guiding Sri Aurobindo both in his political and spiritual work. For many months no one knew where he was, such was the vigour with which Sister Nivedita filled up the journal's spaces. And when its work was done and *Karmayogin* was folding up, she published her credo which she has also left behind for us all as a guardian-charm for sculpting our lives:

> I believe that India is one, indissoluble, indivisible. National Unity is built on the common home, the common interest, and the common love.
>
> I believe that the strength which spoke in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, in the making of religions and empires, in the learning of scholars and the meditation of the saints, is born once more amongst us, and its name today is Nationality.
>
> I believe that the present of India is deep-rooted in her past, and that before her shines a glorious future (351).

She never wrote a sentence in vain. Always the words came from her heart. She had trained herself so from her younger days and Truth became her flagstaff after she became the disciple of Swamiji. Though the general public had access to her classics like *Kali the Mother*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, *Footfalls of Indian History*, *The Web of Indian Life*, and *The Master as I saw Him*, and there was also a collected edition of

her speeches and papers, it was only when Lizelle Reymond published her well-researched work on Sister Nivedita in 1953 that the complete woman moulded as a classical Indian heroine appeared before us.

Like them—Draupadi, Sita, Savitri—Nivedita was no stranger to sorrow and pain. When she gave her allegiance, it was total. She had come to India to educate girl children, and just as she drew them close to her heart, the Indian nation itself became her mother. She had been an activist in the Irish desire to be freed from British overlordship. So she knew the sorrow of belonging to a subject nation. With the same passion for Irish freedom, Margaret now began to work for the freedom of Mother India. Swamiji had ordained her into the Ramakrishna Order and given her the name 'Nivedita'. So apt, for had she not offered her entire being to the Divine's work in India? And as perfect a description of her work in India is Swamiji's blessing to Nivedita, long before she would become involved in the freedom struggle of the nation: let us remember that a guru's blessing is never in vain.

> The mother's heart, the hero's will,
> The sweetness of the southern breeze,
> The sacred charm and strength that dwell
> On Aryan altars, flaming, free;
> All these be yours, and many more
> No ancient soul could dream before—
> Be thou to India's future son
> The mistress, servant, friend in one.[4]

As one who was working with the nationalists, she knew what exactly the need of the hour was. Hence she promoted domestic industries since economic self-dependence was a key factor for a free nation. *Svadeshi*! She was tireless in encouraging young men to come forward and take responsible positions in the work; she managed to send some of them to England, the US, and Japan where they learnt new techniques. Thus she furthered the dimensions of Swamiji's neo-Vedanta that did not forget the society, nor its elemental needs like freedom and pride in the nation.

> She [Sister Nivedita] sought a spirituality that was eminently practical, that mingled with life and had become a part of life. Whenever she discovered some foreign article in the stock of a shop in the bazaar, she was furiously angry. But the most simple Hindu wares—an earthernware cup, a finely made oil lamp costing less than one cent—were full of charm for her. They became the subject of newspaper articles. Her descriptions emphasised the elegance of simple lines, and established canons of taste. She revealed beauties which the Hindus themselves had failed to see, and which they discovered with her.[5]

Such was her timely intervention to stop the juggernaut of Western culture which had already destroyed much of the glory and good in Indian culture. English education had thrown on the wayside the priceless Sanskrit heritage. Fortunately, Sister Nivedita's *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, started a trend among Indians to go back to their ancient tales and legends, write about them in a simple style and thus helped the English-educated Indian to return to his own life-giving sources. By writing vividly about her pilgrimages, she instilled in the Indian a pride in his past and even a touch of shame for having neglected his art, architecture, and painting. She had no sympathy for the westerner who said Indians have no sense of history while this was a unique land which was itself history.

> If India itself be the book of Indian history, it follows that travel is the true means of reading that history. The truth of this statement, especially while the published renderings of our history remain so inadequate and so distorted, ought never to be forgotten. Travel as a mode of study is of infinite importance. Yet it is not everything. It is quite possible to travel the

> world over and see nothing, or only what is not true. We see, after all, only what we are prepared to see. How to develop the mind of the taught, so that it shall see, not what its teacher has led it to expect, but the fact that actually passes before the eyes is the problem of all right scientific education. In history also, we want to be able to see, not the thing that would be pleasant, but the thing that is true.[6]

Travelling to places is nothing new in Indian culture for pilgrimages are part of the religious and spiritual training of the Indian. For instance, the pilgrimages of Acharya Shankara, Acharya Ramanuja, and other spiritual luminaries have been recorded in extenso. Indeed, sannyasa itself seems to have been equated with wide travels as the aspirant for monkhood was expected to go on a long pilgrimage. Swamiji spent a few years wandering to sacred places in India, before he went to America. Sister Nivedita had known all this. However, she felt that this has also kept the Indian away from keeping her or his eyes and ears open to 'other' beauties and significant spaces in these pilgrim spots. She or he took it for granted that it was all familiar once she or he heard the name of the spot or the religion associated with it most. Yet she or he was not separatist, rejected nothing and ever pressed forward towards a glorious synthesis which is why there are so many layers of history imbedded in all of India. Which is all the more reason for the modern Indian to travel with his eyes and ears open:

Subramania Bharati (1882–1921)

> But one of the master-facts in Indian history, a fact borne in upon us more deeply with every hour of study, is that India is and always has been a synthesis. No amount of analysis, racial, lingual, or territorial, will ever amount in the sum to the study of India. Perhaps the axioms of Euclid are not axioms after all. Perhaps all the parts of a whole are not equal to the whole. At any rate, apart from and above, all the fragments which must be added together to make India, we have to recognise India herself, all-containing, all-dominating, moulding and shaping the destinies and the very nature of the elements out of which she is composed. The Indian people may be defective in the methods of mechanical organisation, but they have been lacking, as a people, in none of the essentials of organic synthesis. No Indian province has lived unto itself, pursuing its own development, following its own path, going its way unchallenged and alone (13).

What a tremendously intuitive summing up of the character of a nation! There is no aspect of Indian culture that Nivedita touched upon without making it glitter brilliantly, warts and

IMAGE: HTTP://DBSJEYARAJ.COM

all. She was so totally stationed in Truth that the right words came to her, as she absorbed the history and culture of the nation at first hand. She was saddened, even angered, at the way the Indian male had treated women and the society had set aside a group as 'untouchables'. Swamiji's views were taken up by her and studied in depth with the relevant literature. As one concentrating upon women's empowerment, Vaishnavism came to her as a breath of fresh air. Hadn't Chaitanya's advent helped Indian womanhood for a while? Meera had gone in search of Vrindavan and thereby gained emancipation. And Nityananda's receiving thirteen hundred women into the congregation proves the strong conviction of the Vaishnava that women too had as important a part in the life of a nation's religion. All this and more we learn when we turn the pages of her books.

Sister Nivedita was an icon from my childhood because the celebrated Tamil patriot-poet Subramania Bharati had saluted her as his guru. He met her in Calcutta and immediately recognised in her a burning brazier of pure shakti. She was unhappy that he had not brought his wife Chellamma to the Congress session 'as she would not understand about great Movements like the Congress'. With her characteristic directness she gave vent to her anger and pain: 'How can one half of a society win freedom when it enslaves the other half? Let the past be forgotten. Henceforth, hold her as your left hand and praise her in your heart as an angel.'[7]

It was during this encounter that Bharati received a lesson in equality as she asked him to forget all these differences of gender, caste, class, and birth. A nationalist was an Indian, a child of Bharat Mata. So how can there be differences between children of the same mother? Also, the patriotic Indian must first prepare to send the foreign oppressor away! 'Your people must become brave. You must have daring to stab us here!'[8]

This is how the Brahmin journalist-poet from Tamil Nadu became an intense disciple of Sister Nivedita. He dedicated his first two books of poems to her and preserved the leaf of a Himalayan tree she gave him and revered it till the end of his life. She was a major inspiration for his group of poems on Bharat Mata and Shakti.

Sister Nivedita passed away on 11 October 1911. However, Bharati's gem-like poem is a living memorial to Sister Nivedita, the flaming pioneer of the omnipotent Shakti who had come to befriend and guide the modern Indian woman, and after the passing of her guru in 1902, remained in India to guide the entire nation as well:

Nivedita, Mother,
Temple consecrated to love,
Sun dispelling my soul's darkness,
Rain to the parched land of our lives,
Helper of the helpless, Offering of Grace,
Destructive fire to the evil in men,
My salutation to you, Mother.[9]

References

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9. Translated by the author.