

### Metamorphosis

One of the most entrancing of changes, carefully fortified by nature, is the creation of a butterfly. An ugly stout caterpillar, builds a cocoon and transforms its life energies, little by little, in an unimaginable way, into one of the most beautiful creatures on our planet. As the myriad-coloured, brightly-winged, delicate butterfly takes wings and soars towards the blue sky, one cannot but wonder—whence this transformation?

All the lessons that God intended to teach us are enshrouded in nature around us. If we are willing to learn, there are lessons in leaves and messages in the dew that glistens on them. Learning is metamorphosing. A very interesting part of learning is questioning oneself. We, humans, have a unique way of deluding ourselves with a permanent sense of identity; until we question the 'I' in all its bareness. When we truly do this, we are in for a real shock!

Human identity is a defining feature of the human experience. No other creature has a sense of 'I' or self as strong as we do. Man values his relationships, his affections and possessions because of their connections to his 'I'. But how true is the 'I'? A cursory look at the mind, which radiates the sense of being, reveals something of the nature of a movie show. The movie is part documentary (based on memory), part drama (based on desire), with a sprinkling of fantasy, comedy and fiction, all collaged together by the ego which poses as the leading actor. And so we sport many identities and remain absorbed in our images and ego-ties. Questioning the ego, peering into its nature,

snaps the absorption in the images, for there cannot be a movie without a leading character, and this disrupts the show. The mind comes out of its absorption and becomes conscious of itself. Control becomes possible. *Atma vichar* or self-analysis thus serves as a key to genuine transformation.

In human beings, the self-awareness has come full circle and hence holds the potential to manifest itself fully. That is why the sense of 'I', the fringe of our true Being, is so strong. With a little analysis we can see that the sense of 'I' has two levels. One is the 'thinkable' portion. It is usually the epithets, appellations and labels we have collected over time. It forms the crust of our personality. More fundamental to this, is the feel of existence, without thought. Now, here we have an interesting find. We do remain over, even when we are not thinking. When scrutinized, this is a state of simple, intense self-awareness. It is completely independent of our mental cogitation. It is also independent of effort. No process of knowledge is involved in it. In fact it is more 'felt' when the mind is absolutely non-functional, as for instance, during periods of tranquility, in the still hours of dawn and dusk. It steals upon us unawares. The refreshing touch of no-thought and the underlying, flowing, unbroken awareness mesmerizes us occasionally. This experience is fairly common in young people. Meditation is an attempt to consciously and categorically usher in this state and then intensify it. It is plunging into one's own depths; bringing one's whole being into full awareness. It can be achieved by training attention,

which is nothing but a spark of consciousness, arising at will, and illumining the objects it falls upon. This makes meditation a cutting-edge spiritual technology to plumb into the depths of our personality structure. Transformation is always transformation of 'I'. Neither change of place, nor method, nor religion actually transforms, unless our sense of 'I' has changed.

In 1898, Nivedita accompanied Vivekananda to Almora. She had left a comfortable life and an illustrious career, in other words snapped the ties of 'I', to realize the truths that her Master spoke of. In his wonderful personality she saw a selflessness and purity that were astounding. Initially she did not know what to make of it. Once shorn of the little self, the truth behind the 'I' resurrects itself. When one touches the magnificent reality of one's true Being, the murky ego which is always unsure of itself, surrenders and submits, or rather acknowledges its non-existence. This is the basis of all true 'selflessness', for the Self reigns over the ego. And hence a spiritual person radiates a dignity that redefines the conventional attitude of respect. Nivedita saw this clearly in the firm character of her great Guru Vivekananda. She saw how indeed a true *sannyasin* stands at the head of the Vedas. Her worship of the person now transmuted into selfless dedication to his cause.

Vivekananda could see the past and future of his disciple and acknowledged the intensity of her aspiration. But the realization demanded neither mere change of place nor exchange of objects, but a transformation, a metamorphosis. And transformation is always in the 'I'. We judge people by their works, but thought

precedes work, and awareness precedes thought. The content and intensity of this awareness renders power to the thought and these energized thoughts inspire actions. Consecration, if real and life-long, has to stand on the bedrock of authenticity. It is not just the polishing of the exterior, expressed in the majesty of our works and the fineness of our words. Every brick of the personality structure – from the inner awareness to its subtle percolation in daily action – is to be trained. Thus discipline, de-conditioning and the essential rewiring are inevitable. Vivekananda slashed down all personal affection, 'only in order to bestow the impersonal vision in its place'. Slowly, Nivedita found that her self-identity metamorphosed into selfless being. And from such natural renunciation came the ability to work in conjunction with the divine will.

Magnificent, vast objects naturally still the mind and uproot the little ego. The loftiness of the Himalayan peaks had been the haven of Vedic seers and sages. Nature has a shrine-like quality and the ambience generated by her natural vibes can be clearly felt by anyone who lives in close proximity with her. One evening in the pristine precincts of the Himalayan peaks, Nivedita felt an awakening within. She penned it down, "Long, long ago Sri Ramakrishna had told his disciples that the day would come when his beloved Naren would manifest his great gift of bestowing knowledge with a touch. That evening at Almora, I proved the truth of his prophecy. For alone in meditation I found myself gazing deep into an infinite good, to the recognition of which no egoistic reasoning had led me...." Her vision cleared, she took note, "I am learning...that there is a

certain definite quality which may be called spirituality...that nothing that I have ever called nobility or unselfishness was anything but the feeblest and most sordid of qualities compared to the fierce light of real selflessness. It is strange that it has taken so long to make me see these elementary truths clearly." The two-hundred year old glorious Deodar tree standing as a silent sentinel at the Oakley house in Almora, to this day, bears testimony to the vibrant metamorphosis of Margaret Noble into Sister Nivedita. A life of complete dedication is the result of a transcendental touch somewhere in the soul. Stepping into a higher state of awareness brought its own vision, its own luminosity and understanding. Meditation now became a habit with Nivedita. And in its depths, she found the rationale of her dedication. The 'fierce light of real selflessness' was nothing but the calm resignation of the ego to the Self. When the ego is no longer active in posing and pretence, the Self is able to manifest itself. When the Self is able to manifest, life becomes one of determined higher purpose – a saga of consecration, a chronicle of devotion. Nivedita's personality was suffused with a divine glow.

Having lost itself, the ego made way for the integration of the highest values of life. The silence of the East and the energy that characterized the West conjoined in Nivedita's frame. Herself charged, she came to Kolkata and found shelter close to a veritable powerhouse. Nivedita came to live with Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, in the winter of 1898. In Mother's house at 10/2 Bosepara Lane, she lived, gracefully imbibing her first impressions of orthodox Hindu life. Onlookers were

surprised at what they saw. Many a time they found Nivedita taking a mat and kissing it over and over again, and then dusting it with great care, before spreading it on the floor. Mother would sit on it and so the extreme care! 'I never saw a face so full of love' was Nivedita's acute discernment of Mother. She saw in Mother what everyone saw, but which none could fully articulate. A commingling of womanly virtue, immaculate purity and incredible love radiated from those eyes, leaving no doubt that Mother was the visible embodiment of divine motherhood. The calmness and consistency of her demeanour revealed the bright light of Self-knowledge. As one sees the glint of familiarity through self-recognition in one's image seen in a mirror, a Self-realized person perceives the same glint in every eye. Mother's eyes radiated this sense of familiarity and unity and hence her personality compelled love and devotion.

For the first time Nivedita encountered the sheer glory of the Indian culture first-hand. She saw the might and reach of a culture that placed spirit above matter, service above self, purity above pleasure. The result was that she became a life-long advocate of Indian cultural values and an undeclared ambassador of the underlying spiritual heritage. She saw to her amazement that Mother's lofty life dismissed, without regret, many of the modalities that characterize the modern feminist discourse. East/West, motherhood/career, tradition/modernity—the disparities dissolve, if life is elevated and made into an expression of one's innate divinity, rather than a fiasco of one's false identity. All '-hoods' are but the means to an end, and not ends in themselves. To get caught up in the means is bad enough,

bestowing it ultimate value is cataclysm. It is a deviation from one's source and hence the cause of one's misery. No human mind can find peace unless raised to its true stature. It is against our very grain to live a life of false values and identities. Hence the need to understand the deep sense of Self-alienation that throws up the storms of anxieties, fears and insecurities in the conscious mind. Many a time we attribute the solution to a 'raised' sense of identity. And hence the run to build greater and greater identity. After a long struggle to find the solution, one sees that one cannot build on false grounds. A mansion cannot be raised on shaky ground, nor a monument built on sand. The actual solution lies in a raised, transformed consciousness. Seeing Mother, one could perceive the joy of living beyond body consciousness and the harmony it brought into one's daily life. Complicated situations, unnecessary heartaches, volatile blunders and unpredictable mannerisms—all the results of inflated egos, got subdued in her divine presence. A Himalayan peace and purity pervaded the household. Every man, woman and child who crossed the threshold felt the 'familiarity' and acknowledged that he had come home into the lap of his mother. No wonder Nivedita could call Mother, 'Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood.'

Holy Mother recognized in Nivedita the soul of a goddess and would endearingly call her 'Khuki'- daughter. She watched with pride Nivedita's growing intuitions. In fact Mother's complete

acceptance of Nivedita, in the midst of her orthodox setting, is another turning point in Indian history, which made the work for women possible in an unexpected way. As if by divine design, it combined the best of the East and West, thus making way for an enlightened global civilization. Nivedita went on to play a major role in Mother's movement. It was to her that Vivekananda spoke of his plans for women's development. Once on a boat trip on the Ganges, he pointed out to her, the exact spot on the banks, where the women's *Math* would come up. The school Nivedita started, which Mother inaugurated, became the nucleus of the Sarada Movement and cradled its biggest, independent, women's monastic organization – Sri Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission.

Touched by light and nourished by nectar, the butterfly flutters about radiating the joy of life. As it darts from flower to flower, it gives us the message of freedom—the freedom to change and better ourselves, to rise above our circumstances, to effect the transformations that truly matter. The making of a butterfly is nature's magnificent act of metamorphosis, executed silently, to teach us that change is always within oneself. Change is an unfolding from within, not an imposition from without. This means we are never at the mercy of a world 'out there'. Everything is indubitably entwined with our consciousness which is fully laden with the equipment required for every change. And once the metamorphosis takes place, we may take wing into a life of complete freedom. ❀

*"Her life is one long stillness of prayer."*

*-Nivedita on Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*

# Ideals of Indian Womanhood - Revisited

PRAVRAJIKA AMALAPRANA

Sister Nivedita, formerly known as Miss Margaret Elizabeth Noble was born and brought up in Ireland. She came to India and gave her all for this country. Even today we can read on her epitaph in Darjeeling — ‘Here lies Sister Nivedita who gave her all to India.’ Really she loved India from the very depth of her heart and had become one with her very soul. Of course, this was the result of her deep devotion to her guru Swami Vivekananda. It was from him that she inherited this love for India. Swami Vivekananda was in fact the very personification of the soul of India. He believed that for the rejuvenation of the country what was most urgently needed was the awakening of women.

From time immemorial India is considered to be a land of great women. In the Vedic age, which is the earliest period of our history and the seed bed of our culture and civilization, women were given great respect and freedom. They distinguished themselves in every field of activity, especially in the spiritual field their achievement was the highest. During that period, the highest goals of human endeavour were open to everyone, without any distinction of sex or age. Indian seers could see the Atman, the soul behind both men and women. So they declared,

त्वं स्त्री त्वं पुमानसि त्वं कुमार उत वा कुमारी ।  
त्वं जीर्णो दण्डेन वञ्चसि त्वं जातो भवसि विश्वतोमुखः । ।

Thou art the woman and the man, the boy and the girl. You are the old person walking with the help of a stick. You are born as all forms in the universe. (*Shvetasvatara Upanishad 4.3*)

Women are the custodians of culture and civilization. By their very nature and quality they function as the harbingers of civilization. Take for example a family

– it is the women who control and preserve the household traditions and rituals. The Hindu culture has produced some of the most exalted women, who may be called the greatest products of civilization anywhere in the world.

The Vedic and the Upanishadic age was the golden age for women. Even in the

*Pauranic* as well as in the Classic age we come across many glorious women. In the *Ramayana*, Sita occupies the most important place. Swami Vivekananda has said, “Sita is typical of India – the idealized India – the name in India for everything that is good, pure and holy. She is the very type of the true Indian woman.” But from the Smriti period gradually the condition of our women began to degenerate. This was due to many reasons – the most



Sister Nivedita's Samadhi

important of them being the invasion of foreigners like Huns, Mohammedans, and finally Europeans who came one after another, attracted by the affluence of the country. As a result of this, the political and cultural integrity of the country gradually collapsed. Similarly, social as well as economical credibility started declining. All these affected the condition of the women very adversely. Thus on the eve of the modern period the condition of the ignorant, weak and downtrodden women of India, trampled by men and tyrannized by society, presented a very pitiable picture.

### Awakening

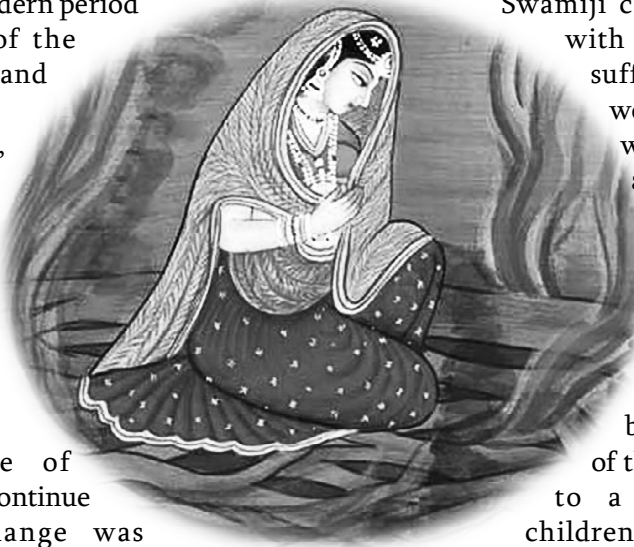
This state of affairs could not continue forever. A change was inevitable. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, India witnessed a mighty wave of renaissance and spiritual revival. After the darkest period of setback, a new brilliant age began. The dawn of this new age began with Raja Ram Mohan Roy and culminated in Sri Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

Sri Ramakrishna's reverence for women is indeed unique in the religious history of the entire world. He looked upon women as the replica of the Divine Mother. Vivekananda said of Sri Ramakrishna that he was the saviour of women and the masses. Sri Ramakrishna inspired one of his lady disciples, Gouri Ma, to do

something for the welfare and progress of women. She later made a significant contribution and built a model school for girls. All the welfare activities chalked out by Swamiji for the regeneration of our country including those for women were on the guidelines given by Sri Ramakrishna. Swamiji was the first monk to give equal right for women even in the spiritual field.

During his *parivrajaka* days, Swamiji came face to face with the sorrows and sufferings of Indian women and he later wrote with great agony about, 'the ages of tyranny, mental, moral and physical that has reduced the image of God to a mere beast of burden, the emblem of the Divine Mother to a slave to bear children, and life itself a curse.' According to Swamiji, men and women in any society

are like two wings of a bird or two wheels of a chariot. Unless both are equally good and strong the progress and prosperity of the country is a far cry. He said if the women were raised, their children would be great; their noble actions would glorify the name of the country. Then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion be awakened in the country. Vivekananda discovered the two great evils which had led to the downfall of India. These can be summed up to be the trampling of women and grinding the poor through caste restrictions. So the upliftment of women and awakening of the



Sita  
Epitome of Purity

masses occupied the foremost place in his plan for the rejuvenation of India. He summed up the national problem of India in two words – women and the people.

### **‘Mother First, Mother Last’**

Women are the pillars of the home and also of the larger home called society. Unless our homes are value-oriented and our children trained to become worthy members fit to carry out the cultural traditions of society, how can society improve? The social and spiritual ideals of society are inculcated and nurtured at home. If they are neglected, society can never improve. So the first and foremost thing is the care of the mother which in turn will shape the character of her children. Swamiji said, “The ideal of woman in India is the mother, the mother first and the mother last.” The predominant characteristic of Indian women is motherhood, which is in fact the fulfilment of womanhood.

The very concept of mother is spiritual in its nature. Motherhood does not mean just being a biological mother. It is a state of mind where one has to only give without bargain. It is nothing but a pure act of love, just giving without any expectation of receiving. Here, love is transformed into self-sacrifice and service. It will be a great gain not only to our country but to the entire world if our women grow in this grace and dignity of being the mothers of mankind. India has always shown her genius in producing noble and glorious mothers.

### **Living with Mother**

A living icon who embodied perfect

motherhood was Sri Sarada Devi, the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna. She was born to preach this ideal of motherhood and to demonstrate the glory of the ideal. Outwardly her life was very simple and silent. Hence it is difficult to understand its real significance. One has to dive deep into her life to understand it. The motherhood of God is best revealed in the touching, refreshing, ennobling incidents of her life. In the entire history of the world, she is incomparable in the manifestation of Mother Power. Being mother of all, she looked upon people of all countries and of all races as her children. As she herself said once, the Master had kept her in the world to show the perfect manifestation of divine motherhood.

That was the reason why Swamiji took Margaret to Holy Mother first. He hoped that through Mother’s blessings Margaret would be able to understand and imbibe these ideals fully. Margaret, along with two friends, met Holy Mother on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1898. She described the day in her diary as a ‘day of days’. Holy Mother greeted them affectionately as ‘my daughters’. Though the two groups were poles apart outwardly, they felt a deep intimacy within. Margaret could understand the greatness of Holy Mother at the very first meeting itself. Later she wrote to one of her friends, “She is so tender – ‘my daughter’ she calls me. She has always been terribly orthodox but all these melted away the instant she saw us, the first westerners....Fruit is always presented to us immediately. That was naturally offered to Mother and she, to the surprise of everyone, accepted it. This gave to us all a dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else could possibly have done.” Nivedita ended the

letter observing, "She is under the simplest, most unassuming guise, one of the strongest and greatest of women." Though they could not exchange words because of the language barrier, they could understand each other perfectly well. Moreover, Holy Mother's partaking of food with the foreign ladies surprised even Swami Vivekananda who wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda who was in Madras, "Sri Ma is here and the European and American ladies went the other day to see her. And what do you think, Mother even ate with them! Is not that grand?" This incident had a deep implication. It was an authentic sanction given to Hindu society to absorb and accept western devotees into its fold.

Another significant day in the life of Margaret was 25<sup>th</sup> March 1898, which was the day of her consecration. It was on this day that she was initiated into *Brahmacharya* by Swamiji and given the name Nivedita – 'the dedicated one'. After she returned in October from her wanderings with Swamiji in northern India, Nivedita started thinking seriously about her work for women. Nivedita thought she could understand them better if she lived with Holy Mother. So she wanted to live in the house of Holy Mother itself as a guest for some time. Swamiji helped her in this. Soon a room was found in the house. After staying there for one or two days Margaret realized the difficulties that she had created for Mother

through her request. But on Mother's part, there was the least disturbance or strain. For she had already accepted Margaret in her household. But Nivedita with her quick and penetrating intelligence understood the inconveniences caused by her stay. Then a house was found for her in the close neighbourhood, which was at 16 Bosepara Lane, where it stands even today. Presently it has been acquired and handed over to Ramakrishna Sarada Mission by the Government of West Bengal and the restoration work of this house of Sister

Nivedita is progressing steadily by the said Mission.

Nivedita loved the Baghbazar area and her house. We find this mentioned in her writings. Baghbazar, in the northern part of Kolkata, has its own fascination for all the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. The entire place is sanctified by the sacred dust of Sri Ramakrishna's feet. On one side stood Balaram's house which is known as Sri Ramakrishna's citadel in Kolkata

and on the other side was the big house of Girish Chandra Ghosh. A little to the north of these is Holy Mother's house. Thus the entire locality was charged with a pure, religious atmosphere. Nivedita wrote, "What a beautiful old world it was in which I spent those months! It moved slowly to a different rhythm from anything that one had known. It was a world in which a great thought or intense emotion was held as the true achievement, distinguishing the day as no deed could...





To live and move about those streets was like walking in some twilight of gods, where the forms of men and women loomed larger than their wont."

### First Steps

It was in this building that Nivedita's first work for Indian women – her school, started on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 1898, which was the auspicious day of Kali *Puja*. The Holy Mother herself came and performed the opening ceremony of the school. At the end, the Mother prayed that the blessings of the Divine Mother be upon the school and the girls who are trained in the school become ideal girls. Nivedita's joy knew no bounds when she heard Mother's blessings. She wrote later, "I cannot imagine a grander omen than this blessing of Holy Mother spoken over the educated Hindu womanhood of the future." Thus the school began from the next day – Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1898. In the beginning it was very difficult to get girls for her school from the orthodox locality. But gradually her love and sympathetic understanding won the hearts of not only the children but also the confidence of their parents. Thus the number of children increased. The reserved and the orthodox women of the neighbourhood also began to respond to Nivedita's good intentions. They began to help her and gradually a good relationship began to develop. The pure, sweet, shy and reticent ladies of the locality charmed Nivedita and an intimate relationship grew between them. To quote an example from the book *Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna Vivekananda* by Pravrajika Atmaprana, "One night as Nivedita was preparing her supper, a sound of wailing arose from the

courtyard of some poor person's hut just opposite to her house. She immediately ran to their quarters and there saw a girl dying....Hours went by and she sat with the crying women comforting them. The mother of the girl fell in a stupor in Nivedita's arms and asked in despair, 'Oh what shall I do? Where is my child now?' 'Hush mother' Nivedita said, 'Your child is with the Great Mother, she is with Kali.' She further observed, 'And then for a moment with memory stilled we were enfolded together, eastern and western in the unfathomed depths of consolation of the world-heart.'" In this way Nivedita became one with the neighbouring women of the locality.

In her books, *Web of Indian Life* and *Studies from an Eastern Home* and others, we get beautiful pictures, which reveal Nivedita's first-hand knowledge about the Indian women, their inner life and their unique traits. The proud, dignified and orthodox women of the neighbourhood charmed Nivedita. She always loved them from the core of her heart and praised them both in her speeches and writings. She thought very deeply about their ideals, their problems and their position in society. After a deep study she could declare, "India is above all 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 recognised while she keeps their memory eternally sacred."

### In Defence of Indian Culture

During the first years of the twentieth century, Christian missionaries were carrying out propaganda in western countries about the ignorance, oppression and the poverty of the women of India.

Sister Nivedita took up the Indian women's cause and through her writings and speeches she became their greatest champion. Whenever she spoke in the western countries she held before her audience the glorious ideals of self-sacrifice and dedication for the high ideals of life, which she had seen in the silent, commonplace lives of many an Indian woman. In India she sought to raise awareness regarding the true concept of 'modernism' and upheld the worth of Indian culture and tradition. In one of her speeches at Madras she said, "When we come to the charge that Indian women are ignorant, we meet with a far deeper fallacy. They are ignorant in the modern forms – that is to say few can write and not many can read – but are they then illiterate? If so, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and all the *Pauranic* stories every mother and every grandmother tell to their children are not literature. But the European novels and the *Strand* magazine by the same token are? Can any one of us accept this paradox?"

In another lecture she boldly asked the women audience who were sitting in front, "Have the Hindu women of the past become a source of shame to us, that we should hasten to discard their old time grace and sweetness, their gentleness and piety, in favour of the first crude product of western information and social aggressiveness?"

As Swami Vivekananda had invited Sister Nivedita to India to spread education among the Indian women, she thought very deeply about the education of Indian women. Nivedita had clearly understood

that the education, which our women received in the schools and colleges, was neither national nor creative. In her opinion the women in whom education did not awaken national consciousness and did not help them to understand the national history, was no education at all. She believed the woman who had no notion of what her country stood for, was not at all truly educated. In her scheme of education for Indian women she gave the highest importance for development along national lines. At the centre of development should be the thought of India, love for India and service to its people.

Sister Nivedita had great hopes about the future of Indian women and believed that in time they would rise to their full stature and bring immense glory to their motherland. She knew the first condition for this was that Mother India should be surrounded by the "mighty circle of her daughters first." It is they who must come forward to consecrate themselves to her, touching her feet, vowing to her their own, their husbands and their children's lives. Then and then only will the country stand crowned before the world. Nivedita declared with great faith, "Her sanctuary today is full of shadows but when the womanhood of India can perform the great *Arati* – of nationality, the temple will be all light, nay – the dawn really shall be near at hand."

I hope and pray that today our women would realize the value of the glorious services Sister Nivedita rendered in rousing the national consciousness and whole-heartedly strive to fulfil her hopes and aspirations. ❀



# Nivedita's Assessment of the Holy Mother and Its Uniqueness

SWAMI BALABHADRANANDA

Nivedita's assessment of the Holy Mother was distinct from what others did in the matter, prior to her, as it brought to light some very important aspects of the Mother's personality, which might have remained unnoticed otherwise. This we can say, despite Vivekananda's emphatic declaration of Holy Mother's greatness in his famous letter to Swami Shivananda, where he placed the Mother even above Sri Ramakrishna and predicted an upheaval of women all over the world centring around Sarada Devi.<sup>1</sup> Also to be remembered is his lecture entitled "My Life and Mission", in which Swamiji gratefully mentioned Holy Mother's role in supporting the cause of the nascent Ramakrishna Order, during the trying times they were passing through immediately after Sri Ramakrishna's demise. Though her bereavement was the most, she had provided sympathy and solace to Swamiji to realize Sri Ramakrishna's mission of founding the new monastic order. As Swamiji said in the lecture, while most people had ridiculed them, which had gone even to the extent of "persecution", only the Holy Mother had stood by the young monks, though she was more helpless than them.<sup>2</sup> One can also remember Swamiji's

overwhelming reaction in learning that the Mother had not only accepted Nivedita and her American companions as her own at their very first meeting, but had also taken food with them, which was then considered a taboo in Indian society. "Is not that grand?", Swamiji wrote in a letter to Swami Ramakrishnananda referring to this incident.

Still, Swamiji as well as those who preceded Nivedita in discussing Sarada Devi in their books or writings, like Akshay Kumar Sen and Ramachandra Dutta, highlighted only or mostly the divine aspects of the Holy Mother or mentioned her only in passing while praising Sri Ramakrishna's pure relationship with his wife. None of these writings addressed her human aspects adequately or at all. This was perhaps reserved for Sister. And she was

well equipped for the task, as if divinely chosen. Firstly, being a woman she had this advantage over the male admirers and disciples to enter the *zenana* of the Mother and observe her from close quarters amidst other women members of the family. For this, the credit should go both to Mother's liberal acceptance of Nivedita as well as Nivedita's eagerness and ready adaptability. Credit should be given also to the other women around



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Mother who also accepted Nivedita in their fold, willingly or under the enigmatic influence of Holy Mother's personality.

### A Unique Assessor

There were several factors which made Nivedita's assessment of the Mother unique. First of all, as she was born in the family of a religious preacher and was deeply spiritual since childhood, it was always easy for Nivedita to appreciate spiritual qualities like chastity, poverty, purity and prayer in others. That is why we get such grand expressions from her pen about the Holy Mother: "Her life is one long stillness of prayer."<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, she had an inborn analytical mind and a keen intellect which were further sharpened by her western education and vast studies.

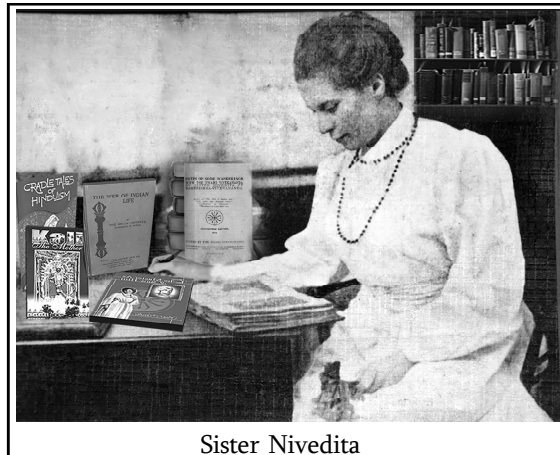
Thirdly, her close acquaintance with some great individuals, of the West and the East, as well as with people from different customs and cultures. And lastly, the influence of Swamiji, which provided her with a true understanding of Indian life, Hinduism and spirituality in general. All this gave her, in addition to her innate love for spiritual values, a liberal outlook and a free mind which could go beyond the parochial, and judge things both from the national and international angles. One can never say that Swamiji did not possess these qualities just mentioned. But, as we already

discussed, because of her being a woman, Nivedita had the advantage over Swamiji and other male devotees, to observe the Mother closely, in the informal setting of a typical Indian household. That was a great privilege which Swamiji could not have and that made a difference between the assessments they both made of the Mother. Swamiji used to believe that the great ones express their greatness more through their apparently trifling deeds. And Nivedita had the insight to discover greatness even out of the trivial. So, with a rare wealth of mind and intellect, Nivedita spent her days in the Holy

Mother's company, the result being some rare glimpses from the depth of the Mother's personality.

We have to keep in mind that Nivedita died in 1911 and all the authentic biographies of the Holy Mother were written several decades later.

Nivedita did not depict Mother's personality much through incidents. She did not have enough material for that. She did not perhaps need also. Seeing Mother talk, work, move about and interact with others from close quarters was a better means for her to understand the Mother. She loved to think, analyse and interpret and her portrayal of Holy Mother was just that, mostly interpretative. It was more of her personal contemplation than any narration for others. Nivedita did not write any book on the Mother. Whatever she had written



Sister Nivedita

on her can be found in her book, '*The Master as I saw Him*' and in a few of her letters. Together they may not make even a fifteen-page booklet. But through that scanty material itself has emerged the Holy Mother of Nivedita, who is unique in many respects. Nivedita has revealed many a significant aspect of Holy Mother's life, which would have remained unknown but for her.

### Rare Glimpses

The first record of Nivedita writing anything on the Mother is in her letter dated 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1898, four months after her arrival to India. Describing to Mrs Hammond how Sarada Devi used to dress in a white cotton cloth covering her entire frame and laying a portion of the cloth over her face like a nun's veil, she narrates how Mother used to meet her male devotees: "When a man speaks to her, he stands behind her, and she pulls this veil very far forward over her face. Nor does she answer him directly. She speaks to another older woman in almost a whisper, and this woman repeats her words to the man." Then Nivedita breaks this information that no grown-up male, even Swamiji, had ever seen the face of the Holy Mother, and remaining fully aware that to a westerner all this might 'not sound very sensible perhaps', she writes: "Yet this woman, when you know her well, is said to be the very soul of practicality and common-sense, as she certainly gives every token of being, to those who know her slightly. Sri Ramakrishna always consulted her before undertaking anything, and her advice is always acted upon by his disciples." To give an idea of how the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna used

to regard her, Nivedita writes: "Then you should see the chivalrous feeling that the monks have for her. They always call her 'Mother' and speak of her as 'the Holy Mother'—and she is literally their first thought in every emergency. There are always one or two in attendance on her, and whatever her wish is, it is their command. It is a wonderful relationship to watch."<sup>4</sup>

In the same letter Nivedita mentions mother's love, gentleness and childlike merry fullness. "She is the very soul of sweetness — so gentle and loving and as merry as a girl. You should have heard her laugh the other day when I insisted that the Swami must come up and see us at once, or we would go home. The monk who had brought the message that the master would delay seeing us was quite alarmed at my moving towards my shoes, and departed post-haste to bring him up, and then you should have heard Sarada's laughter! It just pealed out! And she is so tender—'my daughter' she calls me."<sup>5</sup>

In the same letter, Nivedita throws light on another aspect of Sarada Devi's personality, which she considers her real greatness: "The best proof I can give you of her real greatness is that she is always attended when in Calcutta by fourteen or fifteen high-caste ladies, who would be rebellious and quarrelsome and give infinite trouble to everyone if she by her wonderful tact and winsomeness did not keep perpetual peace."<sup>6</sup> Having said this, Nivedita mentioned that by this she did not mean that the women around Mother were worse than any other, but only alluded to the fact that it was generally difficult always to keep so many women at peace, which job Mother had been doing with incomprehensible ease and

which Nivedita, therefore, considers a real sign of her greatness.

Nivedita concludes this letter of 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1898 with the following words: “She really is, under the simplest, most unassuming guise, one of the strongest and greatest of women.”<sup>7</sup> We will see that within four years since this date, Nivedita had to change her opinion on the Mother from “one of the greatest” to “*the greatest*”. On 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1903, she wrote to Mrs. Ratcliffe, who was then in the family way, “I shall want you to let me offer her (the child to be born) for her first blessing to Sarada Devi, our Holy Mother as we call her—who is only a simple Hindu woman, and yet, as I think, the greatest woman in the world today.”<sup>8</sup>

Nivedita would spend sometimes the whole day with the Mother in her house and sleep the sultry nights lying on the floor with her and other women devotees. A wonderful description of these days and nights we find from Nivedita’s pen: “I spent all my afternoons in the Mother’s room. And when the hot weather came, it was by her express command that I returned to her better-arranged house, for sleeping-quarters. And then I occupied no room apart, but shared the cool and simple dormitory of the others, with its row of mats, pillows, and nets, against the polished red earthenware....

“The days were full of peace and sweetness. Long before dawn, one and another rose quietly and sat on the sleeping mat, from which sheets and pillows were now removed, beads in hand, face turned to the wall. Then came the cleansing of the rooms and personal bathing. On great days, the Mother and one other would be carried down to the river in a *palkee* and till this arrived, the time was spent in

reading the *Ramayana*.”<sup>9</sup>

## A Sacrament

Nivedita considered this a prize opportunity to stay with the Mother in her house, which she knew was helping her to know the heart of Indian life at first hand. In a letter to a woman friend she writes on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1906, “If you ever come to India, it is my firm belief that the one way in which to obtain the true orientation is by trying to live exactly like an orthodox Hindu woman. This becomes a kind of sacrament, and has an effect on one that I cannot explain. It is possible, through it, to change one’s whole centre of gravity. But when I think of all the help that came to myself in doing this, under the wings of Swamiji’s own presence, and in the house of the Holy Mother, I feel that no one else can ever again have such opportunity.”<sup>10</sup>

Nivedita would be overwhelmed with joy in the company of the Holy Mother, a first hand account of which we find in Sarala Bala Sarkar’s book, *Niveditake jemon dekhiachi*: “When the Holy Mother would be at Udbodhan, at least once in a day Nivedita and Christine would pay a visit there and be seated near the Mother. Nivedita would keep looking at the Mother joyfully like a small girl. That Nivedita—a heroic heart like whose could be rarely found, especially among women; whose eyes shone in the brilliance of intelligence and looked so penetrating as to solve all the mysteries of the world, as it were. But in the presence of the Holy Mother the same Nivedita would turn a girl of five as though, with all the innocence of a child and totally resigned to the Mother. And whenever the Mother would cast her affectionate glance on her,

Nivedita would be visibly overwhelmed. Mother used to sit on a small piece of mat spread on the floor. The day Nivedita got a chance to spread the mat for Mother, her joy would know no bounds. Everybody could guess the state of her mind looking at her very face. She would first kiss the mat repeatedly with great reverence. After that she would dust it with utmost care and then only she would spread it. Seeing her then, it would be obvious to all that she deemed her life blessed being able to do this small bit of service to the Mother.”<sup>11</sup>

Nivedita's Sunday visits to Udbodhan were fixed for cleaning Holy Mother's room, which included dusting the bed, sweeping the floor and washing the glass panes of doors and windows with soap and water. Nivedita considered this job to be her holy duty and like a dedicated daughter of the Mother she would perform it. She would be always on her toes to provide even the smallest comfort to Mother, as we find in her letter dated 24<sup>th</sup> February 1904: “Oh, how many comforts I would like to take her! She needs a soft pillow—a shelf—a rug, so many things. She is so crowded with people. I would like to give her a beautiful picture (also), a piece of bright colour. But I suppose one must wait.”<sup>12</sup>

The ideal human nature is described in *Uttara – Ramacharita* as this: *Vajradapi kathorani mriduni kusumadapi*—Strictness and softness are seen rightly blended in the great ones, to be used rightly, against the evil and the wicked and in favour of the good and goodness, respectively. The Holy Mother was a perfect example of combining these two opposite traits in herself. Though full of love and sweetness, she dealt with the very provocative

situations with *mriduta* or gentleness. Again she could be firm and strict also when she would deem it necessary. Nivedita writes: “When there is a need for severity, no foolish sentimentality causes her to waver. The novice whom she may condemn, so many years to beg his bread, will leave the place within the hour... yet is she, as one of her spiritual children said of her, speaking literary of her gift of song, ‘fullness of music’, all gentleness, all playfulness.”<sup>13</sup>

### Embodiment of Selflessness

To describe Sarada Devi's self-effacement, Nivedita first describes an incident as she had heard it from others: “One story that is told ... of her life, is of her bringing to him (Sri Ramakrishna) a basket of fruit and vegetables one day, with all the eagerness and pride of a happy child. He looked at it gravely and said, ‘But why so extravagant?’ ‘At least it was not for myself!’, said the young wife, all her sunshine gone, in sudden disappointment, and she turned and went away crying quietly. But this Sri Ramakrishna could not bear to see. ‘Go, one of you’, he said turning to the boys beside him, ‘And bring her back. My very devotion to God will take wings if I see her weep!’” The incident shows how dear Sarada Devi was to Sri Ramakrishna. “Yet”, Nivedita writes, “one of her most striking traits is the absolute detachment with which she speaks of the husband she worships. She stands like a rock, through cloud and shine...for the fulfilment of every word of his... *Guru Deb*, Divine Master, is the name she calls him by and not one word of her uttering ever conveys the slightest trace of self-assertion with regard to him. One who did

not know who she was would never suspect from any speech of hers that her right was stronger or her place closer than that of any other of those about her. It would seem as if the wife had been long ago forgotten, save for her faithfulness, in the disciple.”<sup>14</sup>

We cannot but discuss here Nivedita’s famous letter to Sarada Devi, written ten months before her passing away, from Cambridge. Nivedita’s writings on Sarada Devi are all excellent pieces of literature, but this letter perhaps surpasses all. The letter describes Holy Mother as “all full of love”, but this love was not a “flushed and violent love, like ours, and like the world’s, but a gentle peace that brings good to every one and wishes ill to none.” And this love that the world had seen in Sarada Devi was actually Sri Ramakrishna’s. Too precious to be wasted, he left behind this love in Holy Mother, the right receptacle for it, to be used rightly for the good of humanity. Sarada Devi is, in Nivedita’s words, “Sri Ramakrishna’s own chalice of His Love for the world—a token left with His children, in these lonely days.” Lonely, because Sri Ramakrishna was no more in his physical frame. Nivedita writes, “Surely the wonderful things of God are *all* quiet — stealing unnoticed into our lives—the air and sunlight and the sweetness of gardens and of the Ganges, these are the silent things that are like you!”<sup>15</sup> To be noted

here is the fact that Nivedita did not say, Mother was like those silent things, because, by that, the Mother would have been smaller than those things. So she chose the opposite—the silent things were like Sarada Devi.

It is known to all that Nivedita had felt that the Mother was ‘Sri Ramakrishna’s final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood.’ Saying this she had put a question : “But is she the last of an old order or the beginning of a new?”<sup>16</sup> Let us try to see what exactly Nivedita meant.

### True Education

For an ideal India, Swamiji said that he wanted ‘to see the strong points of that India (i.e., ancient India) reinforced by the strong points of this age, only in a natural way.’<sup>17</sup> It is applicable to women’s ideals also, as a nation’s ideal cannot be seen divorced from its

women’s ideals and more so, when Swamiji’s watchword for the nation’s regeneration was ‘women and the people’. And it is also true that what Swamiji held as ideals, can well be taken as ideals of Sri Ramakrishna also, because Swamiji said that he was Sri Ramakrishna’s voice without his form. And an attentive study also evidently shows that the ideals of the two were the same though expressed by Swamiji in different words buttressed by elaborate explanations. We will try to judge the aforementioned statement from these angles. It is strewn in Nivedita’s





writings how the Holy Mother's life was rooted in the best features of ancient Indian womanhood and how many positive traits of modern women were also found in her. About Sarada Devi's culture and education Nivedita writes, "The Mother can read and much of her time is passed with her *Ramayana*. But she does not write. Yet it is not to be supposed that she is an uneducated woman. Not only had she long and arduous experience in administration, secular and religious, but she has also travelled over a great part of India, visiting most of the chief places of pilgrimage." Nivedita herself travelled a lot and due to her western upbringing, she could identify Holy Mother's travels as an educative factor in forming her unique personality. Nivedita continues: "And it must be remembered that as the wife of Sri Ramakrishna, she had the highest opportunity of personal development that is possible to enjoy. At every moment she bears unconscious witness to this association with the great." Nivedita hints that so far as spiritual education is concerned, Sarada Devi enjoyed the best of that, under the tutelage of none other than the Prophet of the age and her life reflected every moment the fact that she had learnt sitting at his feet and serving him from close quarters.

Nivedita further observes, "But in nothing perhaps does it speak more loudly, than in her instant power to penetrate a new religious feeling or idea." Then Nivedita describes how on an Easter Day, she could instantly understand the true spirit of Easter prayers and Easter music, without finding any 'foreignness or unfamiliarity in them'. According to Nivedita this was "one of the most impressive aspects of the great religious

culture of Sarada Devi."<sup>18</sup>

The same trait she found again in the Holy Mother when she wanted to know about the European wedding. As the marriage vow was uttered, "For better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health—till death do us apart", the Mother got overwhelmed. She said, "*Ki dharmi katha go, ki dharmi katha*" (Oh the *dharmic* words! The righteous words!).<sup>19</sup>

Repeatedly, Nivedita has mentioned Mother's sainthood as well as her stateliness, her "great open mind" as well as her immense practicality and commonsense, her intelligence and sweetness, her childlike playfulness, her ability to command respect from monastic stalwarts of the Order as well as from the womenfolk.

Nivedita also mentions in her letters Sarada Devi's courage to stand against petty and conventional thoughts. In her letter to Miss MacLeod dated 18<sup>th</sup> June 1899, she writes, "What the Mother is—is only dawning on me now. You should have heard her defend Sadananda against horrid aspersion the other day! And when my *zenana* article comes out you will realise what it meant when she said quietly that in giving us the poses Santoshini's (Nivedita's student) mother had helped *her* (Sarada Devi)."<sup>20</sup> The reference is to her article on the Indian Zenana which she wrote for a pictorial journal, *Empress*. As the journal required, she arranged to take a few snaps of one of her girl students and let them get published as part of her article. This invited criticism from some quarters. But the Mother took her side.

In another letter dated 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1904, Nivedita writes, "The Muslim students have invited me to deliver a

lecture to them at the Theatre Hall on 'Islam in Asia'. When I informed the Mother of this the last Sunday, how happy she was!"<sup>21</sup>

Combining all these qualities, Holy Mother becomes the perfect blending of the best of the ancient and modern ideals of Indian womanhood.

Nivedita's assessment of Mother is unique and valuable in the sense that while she did never lose sight of the Mother's divine power, she also noticed her human

aspects and became enamoured all the more. It is in her writings first that the Mother has been a subject of intellectual studies of the highest order. Swamiji brought Nivedita for women's work specially and he believed that centring round Holy Mother, Indian women would be awakened. By revealing newer and wider dimensions of Holy Mother's life, unforeseen till then, which would have remained so but for her, Nivedita served that cause to a still greater extent. ❀

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*The soul that worships becomes always a little child: The soul that becomes a child finds God oftenest as mother. In a meditation before the Blessed Sacrament, some pen has written the exquisite assurance: " My child, you need not know much in order to please me, only love me dearly. Speak to me, as you would talk to your mother, if she had taken you in her arms."*

*--Nivedita in 'Kali, the Mother'*