Leaving a Responsible Footprint

When the crew of the Apollo 17 was on its way to the Moon, they were overwhelmed by a stunning sight. Behind them was the perfect blue marble, illumining the darkness of the vast star-studded space. It was a profound philosophical moment - the image of the Earth captured from a distance of 29,000 kilometres on December 7, 1972. It was a magical instant. The spectacular image was called 'The Blue Marble'. Earlier, the astronauts of Apollo 8 launched from the Kennedy Space Centre, had captured 'Earthrise' on Dec. 21, 1968 during their lunar orbit. The crew emerged from the dark side of the moon to see the Earth rising before them over the lunar horizon. They scrambled to arrest the image, producing the first coloured photograph taken of the Earth from the moon. But the Blue Marble left everyone deeply moved. It changed perspectives, redefined human goals and created new philosophies. It made every earthling adore and admire his home planet. It continues to be one of the most reproduced images in human history.

Our one and only home is the only abode of life as we know it. This shining sapphire that illumines the universe with life is a masterpiece of creation. Perfect in all the parameters that support life, planet earth is the perfect expression of the bounty of God. It was given to us lush and fresh with green foliage that orchestrated its existence. This decided the climate and seasons that would enliven its plant and animal life. It was provided with life forms from the most minute to the most intricate and elaborate, exquisitely designed to embellish and replenish its delicate ecosystems. A single

leaf, if observed closely, is a delicate piece with intricate artwork, an elegant ornament of mother nature. Each animal life on the planet, holds no small significance. The magnificence and benevolence of creation gave each life form a rewarding place and purpose. Divine in its manifestation, nature continues to shower its mother-heart, thus effortlessly nurturing all life on earth.

Until human ego decided to intervene! The heaving population of seven billion humans on the planet has reduced forest cover density rapidly with almost 30% vertebrate species on the planet suffering extinction or annihilation. In the absence of leaf and animal waste to fertilize soil, soil fertility has reduced by nearly 50% in crop yielding areas all over the planet. The stifled and unhealthy air of urban areas only points out to our meaningless frenzy and compulsive ways of life. The waters on the planet have regularly shown their resentment at human irrationality, by pounding the overpopulated coastlines of the continents.

In short, a sensitive dip into the needs of the entire planetary bionetwork is the need of the hour. If we walk carefully and responsibly on the earth, the planet will support and nourish us. We are nourished by what we cherish and we are tamed by what we maim.

We see this in the lives of all the great humans who walked this planet. They were above everything – sensitive and caring individuals who left a footprint of responsibility on the planet. Keeping their egos aside, they worshipped life. And the planet rejoiced.

In the life of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi we can notice a deep responsibility towards all life forms. As a young girl, Mother had lived in the idyllic hamlet of Jayrambati. Growing up in proximity with nature, she had bathed in the Amodar River that ran north of the village. She would wade into neck deep water of the pools around her homestead to cut grass for the cattle. She gleaned rice stalks in open fields. We can imagine little Sarada carefully picking the cotton pods from cotton trees to be made into sacred thread.

Having lived in the lap of nature, little Sarada naturally developed strength of character, simple yet efficient ways of handling problems, common sense and practical wisdom. In later years, she would be seen respectfully performing the humblest of tasks. She would place a broom with care and would expect others to do the same. She could not bear waste nor extravagancy. Shraddha was a quality ingrained in Mother's talk and behaviour. She even treated her pets with respect. Living in proximity with nature itself instills the highest values of life. Mother's simplicity and profoundity were routed in her perception of reality.

Once in Jayrambati, a calf was piteously crying in the outer courtyard of Mother's house. It was early morning. The reason for the crying was it had been separated from its mother for the purpose of milking the cow. Hearing its cries, Mother became restless. She rushed out, saying, 'I am coming, my child, I am coming. I will release you right now.' She ran and released the calf and only then became calm.

Brahmachari Jnan would ill treat Radhu's cat. But the cat found refuge with Mother. It even gave birth to a few kittens. When Holy Mother had to leave for Kolkata from Jairambati she told Jnan, 'My son, please cook some extra rice for these cats, so that they will not go to the neighbours houses for food...' To make sure Jnan obeyed she said, 'Look Jnan, do not beat these cats. Know for certain that I dwell in them.' That was all that was needed! Jnan could no longer ill-treat the cats. In fact, he fed them with rice mixed with fish everyday!

To walk responsibly on the planet means to acknowledge that all species on the earth, share its consecrated space for mutual flourish. It is to keep in mind that each aspect of creation deserves due respect and the serial exploitation of natural resources will only endanger the human species. Every aspect of creation is worthy of adoration and that to which we deny respect ultimately consumes us.

Let us stop defining success through the lens of the ego. The planet has not come labelled with seven continents, 195 countries and five oceans. We created the brackets and divisions since the human ego is conditioned to function within names and boundaries. Nature is not bracketed, nor has the planet divisions.

To leave a footprint of care and responsibility, a befitting human footprint, let us accept the essential nature of life – unity, love and respect for every life form and every bounty of nature. As we wake up to these fundamental aspects of existence, we would naturally become humble enough to walk sensitively and responsibly upon the planet. The largest shrine is the vibrant, expansive lap of nature, fragrant with the incense of her myriad blooms and flowers, and lit by the sunbeams streaming through her azure firmament. Let us walk with the sensitive perception that the very earth we tread upon is holy ground.

[This article comprises of fond reminiscences of most revered Ajayaprana Mataji. The reminiscences have been culled from many devotees who had close association with Mataji.]

The quaint environs enveloping a building that bears distinct marks of the early 1900s stands in meditative silence in Thycaud, a locality in Thiruvanan- thapuram known for its dignified calmness. Just beside it is the police training centre that makes sure its sound and fury does not hamper the building's serenity. It is in this building that the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission functions in the capital of Kerala, where the Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda movement took deep roots.

The building was chosen in 1973 to be the Sarada Mission by Pravrajika Ajayaprana, then a young *sannyasini* of the order. A favourite of the students, she used to teach physics too in the school run by the Math in Thrissur, and was a 'father figure' for many in the hostel. She was in charge along with Pravrajika Dheeraprana.

Sarada Nair, now 71, was just a girl when she stayed at the hostel in the early 1960s. "I remember Ajayapranaji as a staunch figure, ever in control and always dynamic. Her poise and persona evoked in me a sense of stoic respect. To me, she appeared a father whereas Dheerapranaji was the mother in her soft, mellowed approach," she recollects as she finishes her prayers at the memorial service held for Ajayaprana Mataji who passed away on May 14 in Thiruvananthapuram.

Sarada Nair then went on to study physics and be a teacher like Mataji. "After

my marriage, Ajayapranaji and Dheerapranaji used to visit my home often. They would ask my husband to take good care of 'their girl' as they called me," she says.

A Godsend

Ajayapranaji's shift from Thrissur to Thiruvananthapuram was something probably the city looked forward to. Thiruvananthapuram itself was at a crossroad of development with the city slowly evolving as the knowledge capital of a modern-day Kerala. The Sarada Mission stationed quite close to some of the prestigious colleges here and with most of the devotees being either students or professionals, Ajayapranaji's presence helped strengthen the psyche of educated women of the city who had the onus of having to balance a world that was changing fast, to accommodate enlightened female voices along with their traditional role of an Indian housewife. Ajayapranaji was thus a godsend for Thiruvananthapuram.

Uma S. was not from Thiruvananthapuram but from Chennai where her family had deep connections with the Ramakrishna Mission and Sarada Math. Her mother was a devotee, probably of the Nag Mahashaya genre whose faith in the Lord resembled a river that subtly merges into the ocean of *sharanagati*' (surrender). Her brother serves as a monk of the Order. She was hence looking for a place to stay where she could be close to the Sri Ramakrishna way of life. Then she came to Kerala on a transfer from a Tamil Nadu branch of the State Bank of Travancore. (The bank has now merged with SBI and is no more an independent entity.) "Mataji had at first opposed the idea of working women staying at the centre saying the facility was for students. She was such a stickler for rules of the Order that she wouldn't budge till she

was convinced that she could take us in," Uma says.

She still remembers the first day she saw Ajayaprana Mataji, "I was taking a tour of the upper floor of the building that housed the students quarters. In one place, it was dark and there was a screen placed probably to dry clothes. I was standing at the other end and I saw two large eyes looking at me. A stoic female figure then emerged

out and greeted me with a warm smile. It was Mataji, who from then on, cared for us, disciplined us, guided us, let us be free and above all trusted us wholeheartedly." Uma continues, "She knew the hearts of people though she never revealed. She would know who can be given what and how much. Like a father. Like a mother. Like a guru." Uma went on to stay in the ashram for years together.

Even after 1982, whenever Ajayapranaji would come visiting from

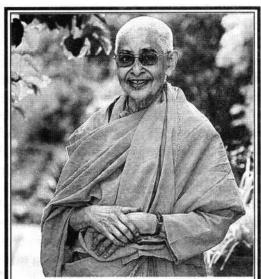
Australia, Uma would make sure she would meet Mataji. Post her retirement from the bank and after Mataji returned to Thiruvananthapuram in 2011, Uma would come every year to the Thycaud ashram, to sit by the feet of Mataji. "She was someone whom I could say anything and everything to. She was my friend, my confidant," Uma says. When Mataji passed away, Uma couldn't come from Chennai where she now stays, as it was lockdown time. But she spent

her time remembering Mataji and their Thiruvananthapuram days. For Uma, the tryst was to make herself an example of how a devotee should lead her life. And for Mataji, Thiruvananthapuram was the corridor to the world that was waiting to be groomed by her in the light of the mighty Vedantic way.

Ajayapranaji's aura had spread a soothing sense of calm for Lakshmi Kutty Amma, and her

daughter Maya; it was a companionship that began with the letters she used to write to Mataji. But later, since 2011 when Mataji left Australia to base herself in Thiruvananthapuram, her role was as Mataji's trusted scribe or rather her 'friend in letters'.

Maya shares her reminiscences, "My mother got close to the ashram in 1974 after my father's sudden death. It was during that time that Ajayaprana Mataji had shifted to Thiruvananthapuram from Thrissur.



Pravrajika Ajayaprana Mataji

My mother found in her a great healing presence. Devotees were less then and Mataji would spend a lot of time talking to her and even walking her to the gate. Later, when Mataji left for Australia, my mother used to write to her regularly and when she couldn't any more write due to health issues, I began to write on her behalf. At times, I would write about my problems too. And for every letter, Mataji would promptly write back. Only now, when I hear about how busy she was and about the other challenges she overcame, I am reminded of how she must have found time to write to me in such detail." Maya's thoughts on Mataji seem as neatly stacked in her memory as everyday life was for Mataji. "There was lots to learn from her. She was very meticulous. While assisting her to translate her book on women saints to English, I saw her ready with everything that a writer would need, neatly arranged on the desk even before I reach. And for even a small doubt, she would ask me to look up the dictionary. She was very accommodative of changes and would adjust to any place or any circumstance with a practical knowledge that bordered on a sense of detachment and understanding of facts. I used to travel with her to centres outside Kerala. And wherever she went, she was at home. And the care she gave to the people who travelled with her spoke tonnes about how her heart reached out to everyone with a delicate, yet disciplined love," says Maya.

There were several instances one would come across in Ajayapranaji that offered glimpses of the harmony she struck between changing times that often demanded an overhaul of habitual and conventional schedule, and the need to follow a prompt regime to achieve a steady mindfulness. Once, in 2001, when she was visiting the Chennai Sarada Math, a lady asked her about how those who do night shifts at work could manage *japa*. Mataji promptly replied, "Your schedule depends on your requirements. If you have a night job, consider the time you wake up as your morning and do your *japa*. There is no harm in adjusting your life as per the work and duties you have been assigned."

Dr. Maya, a retired academician, remembers Ajayaprana Mataji as a guide who found practical solutions for her whenever she faced odds in life. Her association with Mataji was also through her mother. "My maternal home was very close to the rented house where Sarada Math was first begun. My mother used to visit the place often and thus was formed the bond between Mataii and my mother. Later, the centre shifted to its own space where it is now situated. A concert by famous singer Yesudas was organised to mobilise funds for procuring that property. It has undergone many renovations. But to me, it was where my family received Mataji's constant support and guidance," she says. Dr. Maya recalls the times when she would tell Mataji about the doubts she had in doing a particular task. Mataji would tell her, "You get those tasks only which God feels you can do. So, if a work is assigned to you, it's because you can do it."

Encouraged by such ideals, Dr. Maya embarked on many literary pursuits with spirituality at its core and even translated a collection of Mataji's speeches which she and Maya Nair compiled in English.

A stream that slowly oozes out of its source and then becomes a cascading presence - that was Mataji's care for all those who came to her. Some like Sambrita

Datta Chaudhary found her affection motherly enough to make her want to come to Thiruvananthapuram every year since she got initiated in Indore in 2017. She visited Ajayapranaji in 2018 and then again in 2019 and had scheduled a visit this year too. "To me, she is my mother and guru. She would be there always to welcome us and see us off warmly as mothers do. I have an auto immunity disorder. When Mataji came to know of this, she read up everything on the Net about it and even arranged an expert advice from Government Medical College in Thiruvananthapuram," she says. Sambrita plans to visit Thiruvananthapuram again. "It is my guru's place," she says.

Value of Discipline

Discipline is a trait often mistaken as rigidity. But those who have made it part of their life know the free space the habit takes them to. They become liberated souls who follow a regime only because the rhythm of life around them should in no way be hampered. They, like a river, follow a charted course but can harmoniously blend with any circumstance they are in.

Ajayapranaji's life is an example of such discipline, says Unnikrishnan for whom the nine years (since 2011) he got to associate deeply with Mataji, was a rare and divine opportunity. "Her ability to blend with the surroundings was remarkable. Even when there were difficulties, there would be no word of discomfort from Mataji. Neither would she go against rules. Even the prescriptions laid down by the doctor would be strictly followed by her only because she didn't want to create hardships for anyone. She lived for devotees, organised tours for

them, and gave personal care to their wellbeing," he says.

It was in Unnikrishnan's vehicle that Mataji would travel when she had to go out of town. Each of those trips was memorable for the rich talks they had. "She had indepth knowledge on any topic, may it be literature, science, philosophy, and even ways of conduct. She once taught me how to eat food properly, relishing each bite." For Unnikrishnan, she was an immensely gifted person who could speak judging the character of the audience much like Swami Ranganathanandaji did, a poet who would not just compose poetry but even put it to music, a writer and scholar who was not shy of learning even when she didn't have to, a personality with staunch values that probably had to do with her grooming as someone who aspired to join the Independence movement led by Gandhiji when a student, and a divine force who blessed him to serve her from the time. she landed in Thiruvananthapuram from Australia till the time her mortal remains were taken to Thrissur for her last rites.

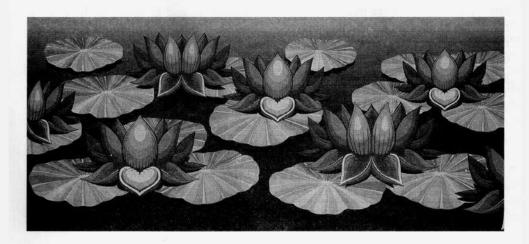
For Sreevidya Nair, Ajayapranaji was her and her son's 'guru mataji'. She has reminisced about the warm hug Mataji gave her a few days before her health worsened leading to her hospitalisation and passing away. "When I went into her room to do pranams, she opened her hands to me and held me in an embrace. To me, there can be no more bliss than this," she says of her guru who was supportive of her during her troubled times. Her son, 12-year-old Advait, was a favourite of Mataji. "The first gift of his birthday every year would be from Mataji," Sreevidya wrote.

Sarada Achuthan, the ever-smiling 82-year-old who has been a regular devotee of Thiruvananthapuram ashram, recalls her 47-year-old association with Mataji as a beautiful phase of her life. "When the ashram opened in 1973, I used to attend her lectures. The ashram then had a hall with a palm-thatched roof and straw mats and a few chairs on ground. Everyone would sit in rapt attention to hear Mataji speak Vedantic truths laced with stories and interesting anecdotes. She would start at 5 pm sharp and end at 6. Her punctuality was impeccable," Sarada Achuthan says.

Their bond was never about support or suggestions for problems but more about happiness. "Mataji would prompt me to sing bhajans. She even taught me some," Sarada Achuthan remembers. She would go home and share the stories of Mataji with her children, one of whom grew up to join the order. "We were so happy with Mataji around that when she left for Australia, we were all in tears," Sarada Achuthan says, with the ease of a devotee who lives immersed in songs and chants of the Supreme.

A Blessed Life

Dashapushpam is a book in Malayalam written by Ajayaprana Mataji that encapsulates the life of ten women who lived a life infused by divinity including Kuroor Amma (a devotee of Lord Krishna who saw the lord as her little son) and Rabia, the Sufi saint. The title literally means ten flowers. To all those who have basked in the love and care of Mataji, Pravrajika Ajayaprana was the eleventh flower. She would chide some for not visiting the ashram often even while innocently telling them, "Do you know girl, I pray for you every day." She allowed them to celebrate her birthdays. She would allow whoever visited her to sit by her feet and listen to her talk. And when they bid goodbye for the day, she would sit in the chair facing the entrance and lovingly see them move to the gate. Sarada Math carries so much of her presence that for all those who shared even minutes with her, the presence still remains. As words of power, a look of warmth, as acts of prayer, and as the eleventh flower who lived in God. 帶



From Sri Ramakrishna to Sister Nivedita — The Birth of an Institution

PRAVRAJIKA BHAVANIPRANA

The greatness of any institution does not depend on its number of buildings, the size of its library, the number of people involved in it, but on the sincerity and dedication of the visionary behind it who translates the vision into action. The source of a river is always very small and narrow but as it flows, the river assumes a vast dimension before finally merging into the ocean. The same is true in the case of Nivedita School, the institution started by Sister Nivedita, which has assumed a huge dimension today— being a centre of education, art, literature, culture, and science.

How did it all start? The birth of this institution can be traced back to Sri Ramakrishna— the incarnation of this age, with the Divine Mother's inspiration behind him. Both Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita firmly believed that it was the Divine Mother Kali's power working through the person of Sri Ramakrishna, who transmitted it to the Holy Mother on one hand to guide, nurture, and bless this women's institution and on the other hand to Narendranath, his chief disciple who in turn, transmitted it to his spiritual daughter, Nivedita. Thus the divine legacy was inherited and passed on.

Swami Vivekananda, while at Ridgely Manor blessed Nivedita and Sara Bull, "I give you all that Ramakrishna Paramahamsa gave to me. What came from a woman (Mother Kali), I give it to you two women. Do what you can with it. Women's hands will be the best anyway to hold what came from a

woman. Anyway, I cast the load on you." So, Nivedita was fully conscious that Mother Kali worked through her.

Integrating the Best of East and West

In fact, one of the main objectives in Sri Ramakrishna's incarnation was awakening women power to their true glory of divinity. This significance is clear in Sri Ramakrishna's worshipping Mother Kali as his chosen deity, accepting a spiritual preceptor in Bhairavi Brahmani, seeing the Divine Mother among all women and as a culmination, worshipping his divine consort Sarada as the Shodasi on Phalaharini Kalipuja day offering at her feet the fruits of all his sadhana. The latent spiritual consciousness in the Holy Mother was awakened and he entrusted her to fulfill his mission after his passing away.

Again, it was Sri Ramakrishna, who had trained young Naren as the leader, Swami Vivekananda as he was called later. The young man craved for Nirvikalpa Samadhi, and Sri Ramakrishna made him give up the idea and work for others. When Narendranath accepted Mother Kali, Sri Ramakrishna was immensely pleased. Henceforth, he could be utilized for Mother's work, for the good of all.

Naren received the novel idea of Sivajnane Jivaseva — serving jiva as Shiva—from Sri Ramakrishna himself in Dakshineswar. Having understood the enormous significance of it, Swami Vivekananda introduced it into the

Ramakrishna monastic tradition. That is behind all service activities conducted by the Math and Mission. This Nivedita school also has the same motto. Therefore, the seed was sown by Sri Ramakrishna Himself.

It was clear to Sri Ramakrishna's prophetic vision that in Holy Mother's character was embodied the best of the eastern woman's virtues such as purity, humility, patience, spirituality, and self-

abnegation. Sister Nivedita was the best representative of western culture embodying the dynamism, efficiency, scientific temperament and self-reliance. Therefore, Swami Vivekananda aimed at the union of these two trends by arranging the meeting of these two unique personalities Holy Mother and Sister Nivedita on that historically significant day,

March 17, 1898. Sister wrote in her diary—
"the day of days", when she first met the
Holy Mother. The loving reception and
acceptance of Nivedita, Josephine McLeod,
Ole Bull among others,by an orthodox
Hindu Brahmin widow like Holy Mother,
calling them as her daughters, granted the
irrevocable sanction for Nivedita's future
mission in India. It was like a green signal.
It was the fulfillment of Swami Vivekananda's
dream of the East and West meeting,
exchanging what was best in each other and

being mutually beneficial.

The Holy Mother herself consecrated the school on the auspicious Kalipuja day on November 13, 1898 and showered her blessings on all the students that they would become the ideal women of the future. Nivedita was overjoyed by this and could not imagine a grander omen for the education of Indian women. Nivedita wrote. "To me, it has always appeared that

the Holy Mother is Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood." She asks, "But was she the last of an old order or the beginning of a new?" In fact, Mother was like a bridge between the two. The same divine power which expressed in the Holy Mother contin-ued to express through the new order of women represented by Sister Nivedita, Sister Christine, Sudhira and later Pravrajika

Bharatiprana Mataji, the first President of Sri Sarada Math. Thus the legacy was passed on from the Holy Mother to the next generation.



Sri Sarada Devi and Sister Nivedita

'The Future Belongs to Metaphysical Women'

What was needed was not merely a girls' school or a widows' home but a cultural centre for training educators—in short, Swami Vivekananda aimed at nothing less than a Sannyasini Sangha taking

the responsibility. Swami Vivekananda repeatedly said that a Math will be established with the Holy Mother as the nucleus, once again Gargis and Maitreyis will appear. Swami Vivekananda wrote in a letter-the past belonged to the strong physical men and the future belongs to metaphysical women. He dreamt of a race of superwomen, who could successfully combine the western spirit of dynamism and freedom with the eastern spirit of self-denial and asceticism—the educators of a new order. Before she came into contact with Swami Vivekananda, Margaret Noble, later Sister Nivedita, was in search of truth and intensely prayed to offer herself to a divine cause.

When she came to India on Swami Vivekananda's invitation, she had to face a lot of inconveniences like poverty, ignorance, prejudice, criticism, orthodoxy, besides the sultry heat. Nivedita had to understand India and her culture, in order to truly identify herself with the new country of her adoption. Swami Vivekananda took upon himself the task of training her by a series of discussions, oral instructions, writing letters, besides taking her with him to various places of historical significance and pilgrimage. Thus a new vision opened in front of her and she realized the greatness and glory of India. The highly intellectual western critic got transformed into a humble, devoted disciple leading an ascetic way of life.

Swami Vivekananda chose Nivedita as she had the necessary qualities— both spiritual and intellectual. She had the devotion of a disciple, was selfless, and could pass on the living fire. Having found such a one and having trained her, he felt that she could in turn train others and the work would then continue and expand.

After studying the pathetic condition of Hindu women, Swami Vivekananda had said that education is the panacea for all the evils and it must be along national lines. Liberty is the first condition of growth. Swami Vivekananda himself introduced Nivedita to the educated people of Bengal. He would say that Miss Noble was a gift from England and she was a great acquisition for our country. He made her speak to groups of devotees and well-wishers about her mission. He was personally present in these meetings encouraging her and even pressed some of the devotees to promise to her that they would send their daughters to her school.

The Ideal Karma Yogini

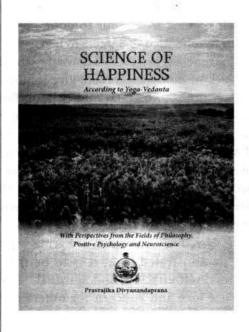
Inspite of all this, Nivedita's task was not at all easy. She had to beg the orthodox parents, going from door to door, urging them to send their daughters to her school. At one time, she had to close down the school for lack of funds, go abroad, give lectures, collect funds and restart the school. But Nivedita was a fighter in spirit. Any amount of obstruction could not make her go down in fear or depression. Nothing could overcome her indomitable energy, never accepting defeat with a diehard attitude, till her last breath. Even personal salvation was too small a goal for her.

Nivedita set an ideal of Karma yoga; she demonstrated what it is to be truly selfless, self-effacing, and spiritual. Her intense love and concern for others had made her forget her own basic physical needs such as food, rest, comfort and sleep while serving and caring for others. For her, to labour was to pray, to hold a trust was as good as renunciation, life itself had

become an act of silent and intense prayer within and tremendous action without. The demarcation between the sacred and the secular had vanished completely.

Prof. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, the eminent social thinker and intellectual said, "If Vivekananda had not done anything but imported Nivedita into the Indian sphere of activity, his life-work would have still remained exceedingly epochmaking and fruitful. She was his miraculous discovery for India and grew into one of the profoundest treasures of Indian people."







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