

The Spirit of Dedication

It was the summer of 1899 in Kolkata. Plague had taken the form of an epidemic. Hundreds fell, thousands fled the city. In a slum in the Baghbazar area, a young boy of about eleven was critical. In her rounds of the slum, Sister Nivedita, the Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda, chanced upon the boy and was moved by his condition. She sat beside him and started nursing him. He would grow delirious and toss his head from side to side. His fever-lit burning eyes constantly alighted on hers and he murmured “Ma! Ma!” for he mistook Nivedita for his mother. Dr. Radha Gobinda Kar who visited the slum and treated the affected made the following observation, “Having discussed with Sister Nivedita the possibilities of hygienic nursing in the slums of the poor people, I asked her to take precautions. When I went to visit the patient again in the afternoon I saw her sitting with the child in her lap in the damp and weather-beaten hut in that unhealthy locality! Day in and day out, night after night, she remained engaged in nursing the child in that hut...her nursing never slackened even when death was a certainty. After two days, the child lay in eternal sleep in the affectionate lap of the merciful lady.”

As the epidemic raged, with characteristic self-abandon, Nivedita nursed many into health, sometimes foregoing her diet for the patient. Ignoring the danger of infection, she was found sweeping streets and disposing sewage in many localities. When huts had to be disinfected, she was found white-washing walls standing on a ladder. The oppressive

heat made her sweat profusely and her body ached but her energy was inexhaustible. In fact it was her enthusiasm that turned infectious and many young men of the neighbourhood started cleaning the lanes themselves.

Every great life, and by greatness we mean a life that has partaken something of its true purpose, has been a life of dedication. Somewhere deep down in the recesses of the heart, the strings that inspire action, are well anchored. The inspiration may be an idea, ideal or a person. It is devotion to this, an unswerving, unwavering leaning towards this fountain head, that evolves into the true spirit of dedication. The dedicated life has its mainspring in devotion. Devotion, like nothing else, unleashes inner vitalities and life energies. It brings knowledge unasked. Unknown powers effervesce, the mind suddenly sparkles with fresh life and any task appears a game. Devotion culminates in wholehearted dedication. And this state of mind has its own characteristics and norms, quite apart from the normal mind. Sacrifice loses its deprivational ring and becomes delightful, hard work suddenly becomes effortless and expeditious; even pain and defeat become acceptable by dedication. They translate into patience and maturity, rather than offence and anger. Charged with the radiance of the ideal, the dedicated achieve their goals.

Dedication has a beautiful name in Sanskrit, Nivedita. Nivedita means an offering, lovingly presented. And such indeed was the life of Miss Margaret Noble, an Irish woman of keen intellect

and calibre who gave her all for the good of her adopted land, India. A glimpse into some aspects of her life will convince us of the true meaning of self-dedication.

The arrival of Vivekananda in London in 1895 set the mosaic of Nivedita's future. The smouldering flames of her idealism and search for truth soon took blaze. Swamiji seemed to articulate her deepest convictions and she soon found she stood at the threshold of a 'great heritage'. Now there could be no turning back! In Vivekananda she found her Guru and father in one. Her *sadhana* would now be, to make of herself 'a servant of his love for his people.' The sheer humility of her being is staggering in its magnificence.

After her arrival in India in January 1898, Nivedita under the guidance of Vivekananda, began her studies of the East. Within a year, she set into motion Vivekananda's plans for education of Indian girls by starting a school for girls at 16, Bosepara Lane, Kolkata. She suffered from lack of funds, as also lack of women workers. But she remained undeterred. Her pupils were unstable. Following the custom of the days they were sometimes married off very early, before they completed their school education. But still Nivedita persisted. The then conservative Hindu society feared to put its girls into foreign hands. Nivedita begged from door to door, urging fathers to send their daughters to school.

Nivedita's spirit of dedication all too naturally blew away the shackles of personality, prejudice and dominion. Sample this for instance—When Rabindranath Tagore first met Nivedita, he was impressed with her radiant, assertive personality. He requested her to take charge of the education of his

daughter. Being an educationist herself, Nivedita could have taken pride in the opportunity, but she surprisingly declined. She asked for the child to be educated according to Hindu ideals. This surprised and impressed Tagore—so much so, that he encouraged her to give education according to her ideals, and remained an associate till the end.

Sir Bipin Chandra Pal once made a striking comment, "I doubt whether any Indian loved India the way Nivedita loved her." Many incidents go to prove the truth of this statement. When Nivedita observed the cultural hegemony of the ruling class of Englishmen in pre-independent India, she thought of novel ways to chalk out programs for change. She wanted representative Indians to go over to England to educate public opinion there! She introduced the singing of '*Vande Mataram*' in her school, when it was banned all over the country. On 3rd February, 1902 she made a strong defence of national customs in a speech in Madras. The speech created waves and alarmed the government, which now imposed a watch on her movements and censorship of her correspondence. Nivedita took upon herself, fearlessly, the task of informing the national consciousness of the problems and responsibilities of the country. The gravity of this task can be comprehended when we view her as a young woman of thirty-five in a foreign land, undermining the unjust policies of a mighty colonial empire. Her influence on students was enormous since she radiated an irresistible charisma. Her fiery lectures on 'Nationalism', 'Vivekananda's idealism' etc. resulted in the creation of a number of Vivekananda Societies. These Societies did

commendable social and educational work.

Nivedita's heart and mind were swayed by the aspiration to make India a nation true to its genius. In 1905 she paid a long-awaited visit to Rajasthan along with her party. The historical associations of the place sent a thrill through her spine. When they reached Chitor, Nivedita was moved to the core. It was past midnight. In the moonlit night, she sat on a stone, with the fort of Chitor in view, extending about a mile into the horizon. She meditated on Rani Padmini, the glory and pride of Chitor. Rani Padmini embodied the spirit of dedication to the great ideal of chastity. Nivedita contemplated Padmini's last thoughts when Chitor fell to the enemy and Padmini was about to enter the fire of *Jauhar*. Later Nivedita penned her feelings in blazing words, "Chitor is no mere chronological record; she is an eternal symbol, the heart's heart of one phase of Indian genius." Who has ever understood or even tried to understand India in this light!

As early as in 1906, Nivedita made her students embroider a national flag and display it at an Exhibition organized by the Congress. In its design, it was her spirit of dedication that found a symbol of fine expression. She deliberately chose the *Vajra* or thunderbolt as an emblem in the flag because it signified sacrifice. To her, selflessness made one a thunderbolt in thought and action. She went on to observe, "It is not the thunderbolt that is invincible, but the hand that hurls it. Mother! Mother! Take away from us this self! Let not fame or gain or pleasure have dominion over us! Be thou the sunlight, we the dew dissolving in the heat."

Nivedita combined the best of the

West and East, embodying energy and contemplation, which makes her a universal icon. Among her masterpieces is her introduction to the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, which serves also as an introduction to her all-comprehensive integral vision. It unequivocally captures the quintessence of Vivekananda's message. Her contributions to the Indian National Movement and the Freedom Struggle through speeches and writings are equally outstanding. Her pioneering efforts at women's education were spectacular and personified her unbending will. She was truly a daughter of Vivekananda and made of the same mettle. Her unique legacy inspired a generation of thinkers and freedom fighters. Many great personalities of her era bestowed on her tributes that embellish but few names. She was an unparalleled 'acquisition' in Vivekananda's eyes. Tagore called her '*Lokamata*'-Mother of the people, Aurobindo describes her as a 'Radiant flame', and Jagdish Chandra Bose called her 'Lady with the Lamp'. To Netaji she was the stepping stone to Vivekananda. She appeared like a goddess, Mahashweta, to Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. She was a philosopher and guide to Gokhale, Tilak, Subramanya Bharati and numerous others.

Truly, Nivedita went beyond her generation in the profundity of her thoughts and intuitions, blossomed into a visionary with a practical edge and exuded spiritual fragrance. Her dedicated life stands as a role model for the youth of today standing at the crossroads of life. In celebrating the 150th Birth Anniversary of her life (2016-17), we may learn the great lesson that human life is fulfilled when imbued with devotion. And devotion naturally fulfills itself in the true spirit of dedication. ❀