

Sister Nivedita

Remembering Sister Nivedita, the Irish woman who devoted herself fully to the cause of India (in the late 1800's)

Sister Nivedita, born Margaret Elizabeth Noble, is regarded as one of the great women of India for dedicating her life to the cause of India and Hinduism. Interestingly, she was born in the Western world but made her mark in India. Popularly known as Sister Nivedita, she was born on October 28, 1867, in Dungannon, Northern Ireland.

Born as Margaret Elizabeth Noble, she was more popularly known as sister Nivedita. She was an Anglo-Irish social worker, who was one amongst the many disciples of Swami Vivekananda. She came across Swami Vivekananda in the year 1895 in London. It was the Swami, who called her by the name "Nivedita". The word Nivedita is used to refer to someone who is highly dedicated to the almighty God. Well, in this article, we will present you with the biography of Sister Nivedita, who has made a niche for herself in the arena of spirituality.

Sister Nivedita met Swami Vivekananda in 1895 in London and travelled to Calcutta in 1898. Vivekananda initiated her into the vow of Brahmacharya on March 25, 1898. Swamiji wanted that under her care, the women of India specially in Calcutta be looked after to improve upon their health and education. She kept her Guru's wishes. One of Swami Vivekananda's closest disciples, was converted to Hinduism by Swami Vivekananda with a new name as Sister Nivedita meaning "the offered one".

To introduce Sister Nivedita to the local people, in his speech Swami Vivekananda said – "England has sent us another gift in Miss Margaret Noble."

Early Life

She came into this world on October 28, 1867. She was born in Ireland as the daughter of Mary Isabel and Samuel Richmond Noble. Her father always taught her that, service to mankind is the true service to God. His words made an impression on Nivedita's mind. She was very fond of music and art. After completing her education, she took up the job of a teacher and worked there for a long period of ten consecutive years from 1884 to 1894.

She had the caliber to impart education and inspire others. From the very beginning, she was a very zealous child, who was always full of energy and enthusiasm. At an early age of eight, she had the realization that, religion is not about having belief in the Doctrines, but it is about searching for the divine light that will bring enlightenment. To know the complete life history of Sister Nivedita, read on.

Meeting Swami Vivekananda

She began taking interest in the Buddhism principles. It is during this time that she met Swami Vivekananda, a great Hindu monk. Swami Vivekanand stressed on the fact that, it is the ignorance, selfishness and greed that pave way for our sufferings. His principles and teachings had an imprint on her mind and heart and this brought about a major change in the way she lived her life. He was the one who inspired her to do something for the welfare of the women of India.

Seeing the fire and passion in her to transform the society, Swami could foresee her futuristic role as Mother India. Nivedita began practicing meditation. There were basically two things in her mind that she sincerely followed; one being the search for enlightenment by realizing the eternal truth and the other was the welfare of the world. She left all the things that she could have boasted of and decided to lead a very simplistic life.

Her Works

In the year 1898, Sister Nivedita established a school for girls, who were deprived of even basic education. She was instrumental in various altruistic activities. Her aim was to bring about an improvement in the lives of Indian women belonging to various social classes and castes. She tried to bridge the gap and put an end to the caste distinctions.

She had good relations with many intellectuals of the Bengali community such as Rabindranath Tagore, the famous Nobel laureate writer. During the later years of her life, she engaged in activities that promoted and brought forth the cause of India's Independence. Her writings expressed her pan-Indian nationalist views.

She was a motivating force for people in all walks of life. Her lectures and various discourses gave people, direction on how to lead their lives. Throughout her life, she worked hard for serving the people and society at large. This started having adverse effects on her health. Finally, this great soul left for her heavenly abode on October 13, 1911.

Her Missions

She organised and opened a girls' school in Bagbazar area of Calcutta, with a desire in mind to educate girls. Her dedication was so much for a cause that she used to visit the houses to pursue the girls to join her school. Sister Nivedita always tried to educate her students with the nationalist spirit. She introduced singing of 'Vande Mâtaram' in her school as a prayer.

She was very close to Sarada Devi, wife of Swami Ramakrishna and one of the major influences behind Ramakrishna Mission.

Dedicated social worker

She played a pivotal role during the plague epidemic in Calcutta. She nursed and took care of poor patients and helped in clearing rubbish from the streets. She inspired and motivated youths to render voluntary services.

She was a social worker, teacher and author. In fact she was inspired from her father and college teachers that service to mankind is the true service to God.

Association with Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose

She is known for her unwavering support for Indian scientist, Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose and his work. She helped him in carrying on his work and provided the necessary financial aid.

Rabindranath Tagore said: "In the day of his success, Jagadish gained an invaluable energiser and helper in Sister Nivedita, and in any record of his life's work her name must be given a place of honor." Nivedita took active interest in Jagadish Chandra Bose's scientific activities.

From Sister Nivedita, with love

The volumes of letters, recently released, show Sister Nivedita's dedication to India, the country she adopted.

The life and works of Sister Nivedita (the Dedicated One) have been chronicled well. She was one who renounced her motherland, and all the mores that she was accustomed to, for the cause of India. Her greatness manifested in myriad dimensions. Her dedication, her spirituality and her renunciation are well discussed.

However, it is her multifaceted character and intense love for India which springs to life through this compilation of some 886 letters which have been published recently by Advaita Ashrama, the publication wing of the Ramakrishna Math. The letters also hold a mirror to the India of those times through the eyes of Nivedita.

The present Advaita Ashrama edition — with 85 newly discovered letters — is published nearly 35 years after the first publication of her letters in two volumes, thanks to Prof. Sankari Prasad Basu, a renowned scholar and researcher of Vivekananda. The letters are written to eminent people within India and abroad, between 1897 and 1911.

Nivedita wrote the letters almost like a diary to her family, friends and acquaintances across the globe. The recipients include eminent thinkers, philosophers, Nobel laureates, newspaper editors, poets (like Rabindranath Tagore) and scientists. The common thread is her overwhelming love for the land that she adopted as her own. They reveal for the first time some unknown incidents during the British Raj, like a private visit to Nivedita by Lady Minto then the vicerine, who also went to Dakshineswar temple. Letters were

also written to poets, thespians, to famous designer Lalique, to William John Warner (better known as Cheiro), who many think predicted to Nivedita her death. The maximum number of letters were written to Josephine Mcleod and Mrs Ole Bull, American friends of Swami Vivekananda, who helped and supported Sister Nivedita right from her arrival in India.

Margaret Noble was only 10 when she lost her father. But within those tender years she must have imbibed a lot of the values that her clergyman father had held. These acted as her lode star, as she left her home and her country in 1898, following in the footsteps of Swami Vivekananda. She and her siblings were brought up by her grandfather Hamilton, one of the pioneers of the Irish Freedom struggle. That also left some influence on her, as we can gauge from her increasing involvement in India's freedom struggle, which led to her severance of her ties with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission after Swami Vivekananda's passing away.

Education for Girls

Teaching was very close to Nivedita's heart and she broke new ground in this respect, before she set sail. It is said that what attracted Nivedita to Vivekananda (who held sessions in London in 1895-96) was not only his talk on Vedanta but also his talk on girls' education in India. She was moved enough to leave her home for India to serve the girl children there.

Her admiration for Vivekananda led to an all-embracing love for India which was then under the British rule. The whites here were dismissive of her, the erudite Indians accepted her but she had to face the rigidities of the orthodox Hindu society.

However, in her letter to Sara Bull, she writes how Sarada Devi, the wife of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, would accept her — calling her amar meye (my daughter) — and even sharing food with her, Mrs. Bull and Miss Macleod. “This gave us all the dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else possibly could have done,” she later wrote in a letter. Her Irish background saw her steadily getting drawn into the burgeoning freedom movement even as her love for the country and its peoples began to manifest through her letters. If one goes through *The Statesman* between 1904 and 1906 which were watershed years in the Swadeshi Movement, the paper's sympathetic stance towards India and its nationalistic struggle is revealed. There was an unknown force at work here — the letters written by Sister Nivedita to Samuel Ratcliffe, the editor of the paper. For some time, she herself edited a nationalist paper after Aurobindo Ghosh left for Pondicherry.

Nivedita declared in a letter to Ms Macleod: “The British Empire is rotten to the core, without direction, and is tyrannical and mean...” She also guided and mentored the Neo India art movement of her times especially what later came to be known as the Bengal school whose exponents include Abanandranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar.

Nivedita, who spent 13 years in India till her death, opened a school in 1898 going from door to door pleading with parents to send their girls to her school. She joined Swami Vivekananda, when he tended to the plague stricken people in erstwhile Calcutta.

Interest in Nivedita’s inner thoughts was first kindled through the Bengali translation of her biography (in French by Lizelle Remond around 1960); the actual discovery of a large cache of letters written by Nivedita set the stage for the publication of these volumes. The letters were in the custody of Srimat Anirvan, a Vedic pundit and yogi.

On a Sunday afternoon, in a house in South Kolkata, the treasure trove was handed over to Prof. Basu with only one condition: that he would use them to work on Nivedita. The aged sadhu had received these from Lizelle Reymond and he had been guarding them for a decade, waiting for the right person to hand them over. He found one in Professor Basu. The number of letters swelled as Basu kept adding to his collection from many sources.

Belur Math

The project also had the blessings of Swami Abayananda of Belur Math, better known as Bharat Maharaj. He was the only man living, who knew Nivedita personally giving his thoughts on what she was like and what she thought. Deciphering the handwritten letters was a stupendous task. Before his death the Maharaj passed on the original letters along with some more unpublished ones to the Belur Math.

Among her last letters were those Nivedita wrote to Francis Legget, the sister of Josephine Macleod, on a bas-relief that was planned for the Vivekananda temple at Belur (where he was cremated). She breathed her last on a wintry dawn in October, in Darjeeling, in the company of her friends Jagadish Chandra and his wife Abala Bose, Bo to Nivedita. Gonen Maharaj of the Ramakrishna Mission lit the pyre and she was cremated according to Hindu rites.

Later an epitaph was erected at that spot which read, “Here reposes Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna Vivekananda, who gave her all to India.”

Life dedicated to people

During the plague outbreak in Calcutta in 1899 and the great East Bengal famine of 1906 she risked her own life to treat patients. After treating people during the famine, Sister Nivedita contracted a severe form of malaria that eventually took her life. She died in Darjeeling on 13 October 1911 at the age of 44.