

# The Relevance of Sister Nivedita: A Synthesis of Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge

Dr Priyanka Vaidya\*

The Mother's heart, the hero's will,  
The sweetness of the southern breeze,  
the sacred charm and strength that dwell  
on Aryan altars, flaming, free;  
all these be yours, and many more,  
no ancient soul could dream before --  
Be thou to India's future son  
The mistress, servant, friend in one.

(Swami Vivekananda, 'Blessings to Nivedita')

This paper explores the spiritual journey of Sister Nivedita as a Karma yogi, Jnana yogi and Bhakti yogi to direct modern generations to find wisdom in Indian Monastic order, Vedantic philosophy and learning. It is based upon the writings of Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda, and her experiences as a *Parivrajak*.

Sister Nivedita is a role model for women; she revolutionised education, women's emancipation, Indian monastic order, freedom struggle, social reforms, and Indian traditions by diving deep into the Vedantic learnings. Due to her selfless service to humanity, she is given the title "Lokmata". Her previous name was Margaret Noble; Swami Vivekananda gave her the name Nivedita. She followed the path of Brahmacharya and Karma yoga dedicating her entire life to serve humanity. Since childhood, her only goal has been spiritual regeneration. She wandered like a passionate or restless river in search of emancipation or spiritual exploration; she needed a path. After practising many beliefs, she felt a vacuum, and ultimately met the Ocean, her Master, Swami Vivekananda. Her journey to the East was the journey of a monk who served mankind to experience divine

existence, spreading rays of wisdom and knowledge. Her hands also served during a plague. Her wisdom opened new vistas for women as social reformers.

Vivekananda's teachings aroused Margaret's quiescent spiritual quests, and she yearned to serve humankind selflessly. She decided to take the plunge, though Swami, on his part, was very frank in putting forward all possible arguments against her intention to join his mission. On July 29, 1897, he wrote to her:

Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman, a real lioness, to work for the Indians, women specially.

India cannot yet produce great women; she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted.

Yet the difficulties are many. You cannot form any idea of the misery, the superstition, and the slavery that are here. You will be in the midst of a mass of half-naked men and women with quaint ideas of caste and isolation, shunning the white skin through fear of hatred and being hated by them intensely. On the other hand, you will be looked upon by the white as a crank, and every one of your movements will be watched with suspicion.

Then the climate is fearfully hot; our winter in most places being like your summer, arid in the south it is always blazing. "Not one European comfort is to be had in places out of the cities. If in spite of all this, you dare venture into the work, you are welcome, a hundred times welcome..." (Saradananda, CWSN, Vol. I, pp. vii-viii)

But, Margaret left England at the end of 1897 and reached Calcutta on January 28, 1898.

on March 25, 1898, she was named Nivedita, «she who had been dedicated." And she became Nivedita. She entered a life where she was dedicated to her Master, she

\*Associate Professor, Deptt of English, ICDEOL, H.P. University, Shima-171005. She can be reached at drpriyankavaidya@gmail.com

spoke to God through Swamiji. He was a walking library for her, the manifestation and personification of Vedantic learning. Swamiji wanted to take Nivedita on a journey where new explorations were waiting, the journey that Ramakrishna navigated. Vivekananda used to spend hours at Belur Math, and he discussed the entire world, from spirit to God, from art to immortality, with his disciples.

They talked about the miseries of the world, the problems of India, death and diseases, salvation and poverty, illiteracy and superstition. And he became her Master of the very consciousness and soul: "The time came, before the Swami left England, when I addressed him as 'Master'. I had recognised the heroic fibre of the man, and desired to make myself the servant of his love for his own people. But it was his character to which I had thus done obeisance. As a religious teacher, I saw that although he had a system of thought to offer, nothing in that system would claim him for a moment, if he found that truth led elsewhere. And to the extent that this recognition implies, I became his disciple." (*The Master As I Saw Him*, CWSN, Vol. I, p. 22)

It was the time when Pandit Ramabai, a converted Christian, criticised Hinduism in America. It affected Nivedita and she wanted to give a reply to the American public. She wished to spread the message of Ramakrishna in the West and to teach practical Vedanta of Hinduism to humankind without the constraints of class, caste, religion and race. She earned money through her lectures and articles and delivered wisdom to humanity. She was already writing articles on Hindu religion, spirituality, Vedanta, customs and traditions to glorify Hindu ways of life.

### **Dhira Mata on the bank of the Ganges**

Dhira Mata was like a mother to Swamiji. An American, her original name was Sara. She was named Dhira Mata because of her utmost patience. Dhira Mata got direction and meaning in her life by following the path of the *Vedas*, spirituality and the *Gita*. She accepted this truth that she understood the Bible through Yogic practices and meditation.

Swamiji told Nivedita about the house of Dhira Mata, situated on the banks of the holy river Ganges and filled with love and compassion. Tall coconut trees, almond-coloured villages and houses hidden with dense clumps. Neelkanth bird symbolises Shiva, and Nivedita saw the nest of Neelkantha bird on the nearby tree and felt the blessings of Shiva and remembered the chanting of her Master, 'Mahadev! Mahadev!'

Dakshineswar, Mother Kali, Ganges and worship rituals filled her heart with immense joy and happiness.

People came with countless reminiscences of Parivrajak Monk Vivekananda. A man who wandered in the Himalayas. Changed his name to lead an unknown mystic life.

Talked about his love for God. Told the tales of religion and truth. His stories were filled with gods, goddesses, mystics, avatars, Shiva and Parvati, Purusha and Prakriti, and Radha and Krishna. Nivedita never heard any bitter words from his mouth; he spoke the words which had a universal appeal or compassion, a river that was the same for all, like the sky that gave shelter to all, beyond all boundaries or barriers of mankind.

### **Colombo: New Possibilities Explored**

During her journey to Ceylon, she heard the name of Sita. This voyage with the Master was opening new ways to attain goals. That island reminded her about Sita's imprisonment and the arrival of Hanuman. She was continuously chanting the name of Sita Ram. Nivedita explored the unexplored, understood the unknown and unravelled the purity of human faith and belief in Colombo. She was influenced by their ways, smeared forehead, walking barefoot and unmatched love in her eyes. Coomaraswamy was an English woman, and her husband was a Hindu Brahmin. She offered Nivedita help to open a school in Ceylon.

Swami Vivekananda was a parivrajak, a saint who knew no boundaries. He was a saint to whom Ramakrishna planned a divine motive to spread the message of Vedantic learning in the world. Nivedita felt the Guru-Shishya relationship, and she herself turned into the spiritual daughter of Swami Vivekananda.

### **All embracing Hinduism**

Nivedita considered fighting a sign of growth, but Swami Vivekananda said that absorption is a sign of growth, and Hinduism assimilates all other religions. Swami ji never considered fighting between people as a sign of growth for anyone. Instead, he considered absorption of learning as a characteristic of Hinduism, he retorts when questioned about fighting as growth in religion:

"You are quite wrong", he said again, "when you think that fighting is a sign of growth, It is not so at all. Absorption is the sign. Hinduism is a very genius of absorption. We have never cared for fighting. Of course, we could strike a blow now and then in defence of our homes! That was right. But we never cared for fighting for its own sake. Everyone had to learn that. So let these races of newcomers whirl on! They'll all be taken into Hinduism in the end!" (*The Master As I Saw Him*, CWSN, Vol. I, p. 127)

It was the Swami Vivekananda who, while proclaiming the sovereignty of the *Adwaita* philosophy as including that experience in which all is one, without a second, also added to Hinduism the doctrine that *Dwaita*, *Vishishtadwaita*, and *Adwaita* are but stages in a single development, of which the last-named constitutes the goal. The same One reality, perceived by the mind at different times and in different attitudes; or as Sri Ramakrishna expressed: "God is both with form and without form. And He is that which includes both form and formlessness." (CWSN, Vol. I, p. 9)

During a voyage Nivedita had opportunity to interact with some American Church missionaries. The ship's captain was suffering from a severe headache and Nivedita helped him recover with the assistance of *Turiyananda*. Captain was very thankful to her. He started sending presents to Nivedita to show his utmost gratitude. However, she felt offended and reacted. But Swami ji defined her action as imprudent and mistaken.

Nivedita also realised the scientific aspects of Indian sainthood. She accepted the vastness of Hindu horizons in the context of renunciation and devotion. India accepted her as a daughter, and she felt the existence of God in saints. She realised that the lives of Hindus revolved around devotion and renunciation. «Hindus live by an idea! Renunciation as the soul! Just one idea! India stands supreme.»

Swami Vivekananda talked about the power that permeates all. Every speck of the universe, every particle, stone, tree, and mother Earth breathes through that divine spirit. *Avatars* are worshipped, and ordinary humans worship Krishna, Rama, Sita and other gods. Swami Vivekananda wanted Nivedita to understand the essence of religion. He wanted her to teach this faith in *avatars* in school.

Swamiji talked about the name of God; the name of God was considered bigger than the image of God. Nivedita's mind was crowded with thoughts. Image as the idea? Or objective?

Does God exist in our minds? Only the prayers mattered? Name of God or the prayer...or Image?

He also underlined the need to escape *Maya* in every form. He gave just one lesson, «Escape Maya.» Illusion is the root of the wrong perception. Rope as a snake and snake as a rope is a common example of illusion. He also talked about the Buddhist philosophy, Vedantic learnings, *Nyaya* and Western logic.

During this voyage, Nivedita realised the essence of *Aparigraha* too. She was the epitome of non-acceptance of charity in any form. At her sister's wedding, she got a gown, and she realised that it was the last gown of her life; she would strictly be dressed as *brahmacharini* in her entire life. She understood the importance of

every second; she didn't want to waste a single second on worldly objects. She rejected money, objects and all gifts.

### Ecstatic Play and Divine Music

Vivekananda called himself a devotee and follower of Ramakrishna. Only a messenger of Ramakrishna, a man holding the soul of a monk and a body driven by the cause of his Master.

Ramakrishna devoted his entire life to Bhakti, from *Sagun* to *Nirgun* and *Dvait* to *Advait*. Throughout his life, he worshipped Mother Kali. Tears rolled out of his eyes due to his compassion for Kali; he spent hours before Kali's idol and sang hymns to praise the divine Mother.

Nivedita's questions were getting answered, and the layers opened up as if new paths with endless knowledge unravelled the deep forest where hidden treasures breathed for eternity. Swami Vivekananda was not only a great philosopher but also a vivacious monk, a singer, dancer, musician, player, and teacher of Vedanta. At times he was intoxicated with *Bhakti* and chanted the name of Gods as if Shiva appeared before him and danced on his musical incantations. He dived deep into music and continued singing; the songs were not for himself or others but addressed to God. The playing of Tanpura echoed in the environment as if ecstatic music enveloped the entire surroundings.

In her *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, Nivedita wrote:

In wild and lonely places, at any time, one may chance on the Great God, for such are His most favoured haunts. Once seen, there is no mistaking Him. Yet He has no look of being rich or powerful. His skin is covered with white wood ashes. His clothing is but the religious wanderer's yellow cloth. The coils of matted hair are piled high on the top of His head. He carries the begging bowl in one hand, and in the other, His tall staff crowned with the trident. And sometimes He goes from door to door at midday, asking alms. High amongst the Himalayas tower the great snow mountains, and here, on the still, cold heights, is Shiva throned. Silent—nay, rapt in silence—does He sit there, absorbed and lost in one eternal meditation. When the new moon shines over the mountaintops, standing above the brow of the Great God, it appears to worship souls as if the light shone through instead of all about Him. For He is full of radiance and can cast no shadow. (CWSN, Vol. 3, p. 163)

Nivedita saw the unveiling of the deepest truths through the words as well as the silence of her Master. When Vivekananda didn't speak for hours or go for solitary stays in the Himalayas, he came with infinite energy and a divine aura to bless his disciples. He was always present in her life, as Ramakrishna was present in their lives. She heard every expression of her Master, spoken or the unspoken, worldly or the beyond.

Thus, Nivedita also became an exponent of Ramakrishna's mission. Vivekananda told her about his goals and spiritual design of life, he had to walk on that endless path, and he wanted his disciple Nivedita to walk on that path to keep the dream of his Master alive. Swamiji wanted her to go deep into consciousness to find the path in the denseness of life's mysteries herself. She used to do so; then came back again, and this was going on and on and on.

One day, Swami ji pointed to the opposite bank of the Holy river Ganges, just across the Belur and asked her the motive of her life. He was disturbed to see the plight of women in India and all related sufferings: "Nivedita! How can you sleep if my India, our India, is suffering?" "Why is India suffering due to hunger and poverty?" "Why is there child marriage?" "Why are women illiterate?" "How can the bird fly with one wing, just men?" "Why are child widows leading miserable lives?" "Why is the West dominating our life?" "Why are the women uneducated?" "Why is man different from man?" "Why is there untouchability prevailing?"

Nivedita was astonished and pained to see the eyes of her Master. He was deeply distressed, and his heart was broken by the sharp stones of prevailing orthodoxy and rituals, which had no affiliation with the Vedas.

Thus, the Yogi imperceptibly gave a great motive for her life and transferred energy and vigour through his meditative spirit. She learnt Bengali from Swami Swarupananda to get initiated on the spiritual path. Now she wanted to wear an ocher robe.

Nivedita could never afford to miss even a word of wisdom from the mouth of her Master. So she dived deep into an eternal source of knowledge and came up with pearls which could never be attained by reading numberless books and scriptures. She learnt art, culture, tradition and Vedantic philosophy from him, but the most important thing she learned from him was a love for humanity.

Swami talked about the disciples of Ramakrishna. She was astonished to hear about Ramakrishna's impact on his disciples' memory. Mesmerised by his wisdom, followed him for life. The tales of *sanyasis* sensitised Nivedita, and she realised the motive of life. Swamiji gave her the keys of wisdom, and she became a realised soul. He told her about the two vows of Sanyasi: "Sanyasi lives to realise the truth, and he lives to help the world."

### **Journey with the Master a Pilgrimage**

To Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda's voice echoed endlessly through hills, rills, mountains, Himalayas, rivers or sky. She called the journey with the Master, a

pilgrimage, where she met the self or the Universe. As she wrote:

"What the world wants today," said the Swami—the determination to "throw a bomb," as he called it, evidently taking sudden possession of him — "What the world wants today is twenty men and women who can dare to stand in the street yonder and say that they possess nothing but God. Who will go?" He had risen to his feet by this time and stood looking around his audience as if begging some of them to join him. "Why should one fear?" And then, in tones of which, even now, I can hear the thunderous conviction again, "If this is true, what else could matter? If it is not true, what do our lives matter?" "What the world wants is the character," he says in a letter written at this time to a member of his class. "The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love — selfless. That love will make every word tell like a thunderbolt. Awake, awake, great souls! The world is burning in misery. Can you sleep?" (*The Master As I Saw Him*, CWSN, Vol. I, pp. 30-31)

She saw Swamiji in every shade, a man rejected by many Western people for his ocher robe but also given a standing ovation by the West for his intense knowledge, great aura and a divine personality. She saw him as a guru, a man with strong will and dynamism. Saints, worldly people, educated, uneducated, all religions, all castes or all races loved him because he had a spirit that embraced the universe.

### **Tales of Hinduism**

During her tour of Europe and America, she keenly felt that a country under foreign domination could not dream of social, political or cultural regeneration. Political freedom was the point to start with. Therefore, from 1902 to 1904, she went on extensive lecture tours to different parts of India, urging people to realise the need of the hour and strive to make India free and great. According to her, the three things on which people should lay great emphasis were: first, to have infinite faith in their own reserve power; second, to gain all-round strength to free themselves from the shackles of the foreign government; and third, to realise that the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda was to give light to those who walked in darkness. All her writings and speeches of this period reverberate with these sentiments. (CWSN, Vol. I, p. ix)

In this context, Nivedita's *The Cradle Tales of Hinduism* remains a significant and lasting contribution. They are immortal tales of humanity and spirituality. The stories narrated are from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas. Like an old-time story-teller Nivedita has narrated the tales with the charm of freshness, literary grace and beauty. The collection is very useful for the education of young and youth alike.

**Notes and References**

*Cradle Tales of Hinduism* (1907) in *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*.

*Footfalls of Indian History* (1915) in *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*.

*Kali the Mother* (1900) in *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*.

*Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols, first published by Nababharat Publishers, Calcutta, April 1982,

First Reprint by Ramakrishna Math Pub. House, Calcutta, 2017.

*Notes of Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda* (1913) in *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*.

*The Master as I Saw Him* (1910) in *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*.

*The Web of Indian Life* (1904) in *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*.

*Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 5 Vols, Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1995.