

# The Best Offering – Nivedita

Swami Ritajananda<sup>1</sup>

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Samuel Noble was a popular figure at Manchester. His extraordinary culture and religious bent of mind brought to him numerous visitors. One morning, while he was seated in his study, a missionary, who had spent many years in India went to see him and after having a hearty talk he was leaving when he noticed the young daughter of Samuel. Attracted by the bright features of this girl of ten he tenderly caressed her and said “Darling! The distant India is going in search of her God. It is quite possible that girls like you may also be called there to work. So get ready.” These strange words of an unknown man about a foreign country and his suggestion to get ready to go there produced a thrilling effect in the young child. She rushed to her father's bookshelf and pulled out an Atlas to see the country spoken of. What impression the tiny red patch of the British possession in the map produced in her may be left to the imagination of the readers, but Margaret intuitively felt that she must go to that far off land and work there. All this happened about the year 1877.

Years rolled on. After finishing her education Margaret took up a teacher's job in London. But a born educationist like her could not rest content with a routine life of pushing the three Rs. into the heads of a number of unwilling children. She felt that her energies might be better spent in educating the poor and neglected children of the slums and turn them into useful citizens. It was a daring experiment, which called forth a lot of her energies and patience, and very little of material gain came in return. But Margaret was made of a sterner stuff, not to be shaken by obstacles. She reduced herself to the level of the children and guided them step by step. And this work became an absorbing passion with her. Perhaps she would have lived and ended her life for those children, had it not been for a strange accident.

Novelty is the law of life. No one wants to have the same order of things always. Even in the field of religion, if it is a set of dogmas preached in the same way for centuries, many people get tired of it. They feel bored to death. Margaret and her friends were of this type. Though brought up in an orthodox atmosphere, she could not understand why God should be approached only as father. There were many such questions that these people discussed among themselves. When they came to know that an Indian monk was meeting some people in a friend's house, they felt curious. Why not go and see how this person would meet their questions? He had a successful lecturing tour in America and his abilities might be tested as to how he would solve their knotty problems. So Margaret went to see the person, who with his supreme power, at once opened up a new vista of life before

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“The time was a cold Sunday afternoon in November, (1896) and the place, it is true, a West-end drawing room. But he was seated, facing a half-circle of listeners, with the fire on the hearth behind him, and as he answered question after question, breaking now and then into a chanting of some Sanskrit text in illustration of his reply, the scene must have appeared to him, while twilight passed into darkness, only as a curious variant upon the Indian garden, or on the group of hearers gathered at sundown round the *sadhu* who sits beside the well, or under the tree outside the village-bounds. There were about fifteen or sixteen guests, intimate friends, and he sat amongst them, in his crimson robe and girdle, bringing news from a far land, with a curious habit of saying now and again ‘Shiva! Shiva!’ and wearing that look of mingled gentleness and loftiness, that one sees on the faces of those who live much in meditation, that look, perhaps, that Raphael has painted for us, on the brow of the Sistine Child.”

Thus she first met Swami Vivekananda and was charmed by his personality. There he was as a representative of India about which she heard even as a small girl. When he began to talk, she found that that country was not merely in search of God, but had found Him, and withal could show Him too! Otherwise, how could he talk and argue with them in such a convincing manner? While most of the listeners felt that the Swami was only presenting old truths in a new fashion Margaret thought differently. She had an inexhaustible stock of questions and she accepted him as her Master only after he stood the test. But the Swami did not stay there long. He soon left London on a tour in Europe to return after six months. During that period Margaret had her bookshelf filled with the scriptures of all religions, and made a comparative study and a deep one too. As if preparing for a war of words, when the Swami returned. But she had to lose the battle, since the Swami was always basing his arguments not on dogmas of any particular sect but on the core of all religious ideals, where he had direct access through personal experience. This had a marvellous effect on her. Margaret was also highly influenced by his rationalistic approach to all problems religious or otherwise. Besides that he had given vivid pictures of the rich culture of India, the land of sages and saints, the land which produce wonderful books on religion and possess famous pieces of architecture. Margaret was captivated and felt drawn toward India. But how to express the wish?

Soon came the opportunity. She wanted that the Swami should see the institution of her creation. The Swami accepted her invitation and she began to explain what a hard job it was to handle the little children entrusted to her care. Suddenly the Swami remembered his own country and the miserable lot of thousands of children steeped in ignorance. So he sighed in deep anguish, “who will work for the numerous boys and girls of Mother India?” Yes. Who would identify oneself with the people, supposed to have no culture and civilisation? That task of training the mother, who will educate her children, has to be done only by a woman. It required a woman, intelligent, highly cultured, bubbling with energy and with a heroic temperament to face all difficulties. While listening to the words of the Swami, Margaret saw before her mind's eye the contrasting pictures of the glorious land of Sita and Savitri and the wretched millions of the modern times

who had well nigh lost all their legacies. She, who had developed intense admiration for the land, felt that the opportunity had come to offer herself to serve there. This offering was not an impulsive reaction to his moving words but the genuine expression of her heart that really loved India.

The Swami began to unfold and explain to her his scheme for the regeneration of India; how he proposed to spread education in every nook and corner, this being an essential condition to make them understand the real plight. It was a very hard task and only people with exceptional abilities were suited for that. The Swami wanted to wait and see how far her enthusiasm would continue. So her departure to India was not immediate. But when the Swami saw she was determined to come, he wrote to her later on, "Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work of India.

What was wanted, was not a man but a woman; a real lioness, to work for Indians, women especially.

"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."

The Swami explained to her the numerous hardships she was to encounter in India but she was not frightened by the difficulties mentioned by him. She left England, and on 28th January 1898 she touched the shores of the land which she adopted as hers. About that time some American friends of the Swami had also arrived and all of them stayed near the Belur monastery near Calcutta for some months. It was a memorable period for Margaret. The Swami began the task of enlightening his friends about the rich spiritual heritage of his motherland. As a brilliant conversationalist he could keep his audience spell-bound by his inexhaustible flow of "interpretation broken but rarely by question and answer in which he would reveal to them some of the deepest secrets of the Indian world." It was a marvel to the listeners and particularly to Margaret, "how such a harvest of thought and experience could possibly have been garnered, or how when once ingathered, could have come such energy of impulse for its giving forth." Day by day she got greater insight into the Indian life in which she was going to plunge herself later on. They were unforgettable days for her and she has left the record in her great book, *The Master as I saw Him*. Soon after, on the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, Margaret joined the Order of Ramakrishna with the name of 'Nivedita,' the dedicated one. From that time onwards, a new chapter began in her life.

She had to become completely indianised, not only in the name, for shouldering the responsibility of the service of India. Indian dress, the Indian way of eating, sitting and sleeping on the floor and even ordinary manners of life had to be adopted, since the Master made her understand that a western worker for India should develop a deep Indian consciousness, which was absolutely necessary for meeting larger questions of the land. Nivedita gladly adjusted herself to all these. Born in a different country, accustomed to a different way of life and habituated to a higher standard of life, it must have been a hard task for her. But to a person of such strong will like Nivedita, it was not so.

The training would be incomplete, if the disciple did not see for herself, how

the spiritual life lay at the background of Indian life. So the Swami took her along with some other friends on a trip to some ancient places of pilgrimage, Amarnath, Kedarnath and Badri in the Himalayas. This pilgrimage was of a great educative value to Nivedita. She found that the people in spite of crushing poverty could face life cheerfully because they had not lost their faith in religion. Besides this, she saw her Master at close quarters and learnt many lessons. She began to imbibe his spirituality combined with deep reverence for his mother country. Every word he uttered and every action of his were of special import to her. Through him she came to know of his illustrious teacher Sri Ramakrishna. But she could not think of him as a separate person. To her they, the Master and the disciple were a single soul, each contributing to the other. So she used to call herself as 'Nivedita' of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Order.

Soon came the time, when Nivedita had to take up her task of serving Indian womanhood. In a most humble way a small school was started on the Kali Puja day of the year 1898, with prayerful blessings of Sri Sarada Devi, who is "Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood." Born educationist as she was, she easily won the affection of the pupils who attended the school. In her own characteristic way her method of instruction was often seasoned with delightful stories culled from the Indian epics and touching anecdotes from the history of India. Her purpose was to arouse a strong national consciousness. She wanted the lost India to come back and be again the same old land of glory. If her Master gave the vision of his Motherland regaining her lost throne, Nivedita took up the task of working for that. The students who had the good fortune to study under her, were seeing before them a great marvel. To her the great nation with all its ancient traditions was a living reality. So whenever she began to speak of the heroic women of India, she used to be filled with admiration, that very soon she was silent, lost in the meditation of the heroine. The illustrious Swami had earned the name of 'the patriotic monk of India' and there appeared the true disciple of his, to whom even the adopted land was a blessed one. The very dust of this country was sacred to her. Even trifles of the ordinary Indian home opened to her new visions of the land and its immense potentialities for future greatness. She repeatedly told the students, "India should be your thought, your dream and your worship. She should be your holy mantram."

We are told that with these words she would actually take out her beads and make the Japa!! Her Identification with India was so complete that she never felt herself as a foreigner. It was always about "Our Land" and "Our People" that she spoke. The institution which has grown up since then stands as befitting memorial to the beloved daughter of India, with the name Sister Nivedita School, guiding the lives of hundreds of girls in a typical Indian setting with the best that could be had from the West.

But it was a time, when the awoken India wanted badly people who could infuse the national spirit in the young minds. Nivedita had all the necessary qualifications - genuine love for the land capacity to present before her listeners the ideals they had to adopt, the spirit of renunciation and service. Very quickly she was found associated with the struggle for freedom for India. She had very active life touring the length and breadth of India arousing the young minds by her

lectures. This terrible strain on her, affected the already shattered health badly and in the year 1911 her earthly career came to a close, when she was just forty-four.

Worshippers of the Divine Mother gather rare flowers and fruits to offer at Her feet. These are collected with much care and dressed up with all love, for they stand as expressions of devotion. Swami Vivekananda loved India with all his heart. It was as if the personification of the Divine Mother to him. He gathered a very rare flower full of charm and fragrance in a distant land and left it as noble offering at the altar of Mother India. No better offering he could make than Nivedita, who possessed the rare combination of the heroic temper and motherly heart.

