

# Sister Nivedita: A Life Devoted to Eternal Values

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“God grant me to speak brave true words in my Guru’s name before I die, words with his life flowing through them, untainted, unimpaired- that I may feel, passing into Eternity, that I have not disappointed him!” (Vol. I *Letters* 515)

Nivedita was the flag bearer of Ramakrishna Vivekananda’s missions; the schoolwork never left her, collecting the funds, manifesting the ideal of blended ways of Indian consciousness and Western practicality with Vedantic learning and Swaraj’s dream gave shape to her explorations. Writing was the manifestation of her divine personification, where she dedicated her pen to Ramakrishna and consciousness to her Guru’s dreams to steer the path of coming generations by bearing the torch of practical Vedanta guided by the modern monk of practical wisdom by assimilating Indian timeless learning and western metaphysics. When her health was deteriorating, her willpower was touching the zenith. She wanted to write true wisdom through her books *Footfalls of Indian History*, *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, and *Studies from an Eastern Home* as if her writing was the divine inspiration to perform the responsibility towards *Bharat Mata*. The same thoughts now assailed her mind. How much had she done to justify her claim to be the Swami’s child? The lengthening shadows of the evening had cast their gloom all around. She prayed for light (Atmaprana 280). In a letter written to Miss MacLeod in 1904, she wrote:

“Do you remember how Cheiro foretold that I would die between the forty-second and forty-fourth year? I am now thirty-six. So, I suppose I shall see this cycle, too. I fancy I shall die in 1912. Will these years make a difference in the position

of India? Shall I be allowed to see that I was of some use to Swami? I only want, I shall always only want, to be allowed to carry his burden. I don’t care in the least about *Mukti*.” (Quoted in *Atmaprana* 280)

In the ebbing days of her life, she saw many deaths of dear ones, as if death was looming on her head like the roof, but courage and persistent efforts of karma yoga channelized her energy towards Ramakrishna, which broke the illusion of all the fears of death, disease, and mortality. Mrs Bull’s death was a sudden shock to Nivedita; she was not only emotional support to Nivedita but also financial support to run the school. She was relaxed to hear from attorney Mr. Thorp that Mrs. Bull had made a provision for the school, so she lived forever as an exponent of Ramakrishna’s mission. Swami Vivekananda’s mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi’s demise left Nivedita forlorn in the gloom of uncertainty of life, and she followed her dead body to the cremation grounds to see the reality of existence and the significance of living meaningfully under the umbrella of fears and truths. She then faced the death of Bhuvaneshwari Devi’s mother. The death of Mrs. Bull’s daughter left Nivedita in the dark realms of agony for a long time. That chain of unfortunate events challenged Nivedita to run fast on the thorns of life and bleed profusely to gather the ink to paint the life of a disciple who walked on an untrodden path from the West towards the East and became the warrior who held *Bhagwad Gita* in one hand and Sword in another. Olea’s Death was not the end; on 21 August 1911, the demise of Ramakrishnananda came as a blow to her very existence; he inspired her to write the life of her master, Swami Vivekananda.

Running the school, with the illness of body, agonizing departures of dear ones, and limitless aspirations was challenging. However, Nivedita was young but as old as the culture and civilization because she spoke the words of

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her spiritual masters, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. She was living their dreams and manifesting their principles to inculcate the values of Bharat. Her concept of Bharat is universal; it is the manifestation of *Ekatm Manav Darshan*, where all civilizations and cultures assimilate, as told by Vivekananda, "Hinduism embraces all." She faced numerous challenges; in May 1911, Christine decided to leave 17 Bosepara Lane, never returning. Nivedita requested her, but it was in vain. When her shoulders were burdened with endless responsibilities, Sudhira Devi left the school without any reason to leave Nivedita in the unknown, unpredicted vacuum. Christine and Sudhira Devi never came back but could not revisit and rectify their actions. They wanted to meet Nivedita, but in this mortal world, it was not possible. Nivedita wrote to Miss J Macleod on 21.5.1899:

Only yesterday morning, I gave in and told Swami that I now knew that my school was a waste of time, and he was sweet and told me he would give me some important work at Poona "as soon as we have got the wild cat out of the country"-pending the time when I could go to Europe and bring back money for my "Home for Widows and Girls." (Vol. I *Letters* 126)

Nivedita's perception of death was based on Vedantic learning, and her Indian consciousness prevailed through her philanthropic deeds. Since childhood, she wanted to comprehend the secrets of life and death. She struggled to cross the ocean of life by sailing in the boat of spirituality; that boat, driven by her Guru Swami Vivekananda and anchored by Ramakrishna Paramhansa, took her to Bharat. She dealt with fundamental questions of death in the book *An Indian Study of Love and Death*. Sister Nivedita wrote:

All things bring forth their opposites... Life is a rhythm, a rhythm of rhythms, and rhythm is but a continuous movement from one point to the reverse. Every experience within life is made up of such movement between two, and we cannot conceive that life itself should be different from all its elements. But if so, it must itself, in experience, be succeeded by death. Bodily consciousness must be succeeded by bodily unconsciousness. Manifestation by non-manifestation. This mode of acting and knowing, by not acting and not knowing in this mode."

[...]

For the soul dwells ever in the presence of the soul. At death, a veil that confused and dimmed has been withdrawn. Shall we weep for the veil, as for the wearer of the veil?

[...]

To her, death brings no change. Death changes the body alone. The soul loses not her own consciousness: she loses body-consciousness. And that is all.

The cares of the body are gone ... But that which was the life of the soul, the thought of God, or the yearning to bless, or the

burning hope of truth, remains still, gathers ever to its perfect consummation in the eternal. (Vol II CWSN 262-264)

During Durga Puja's vacation, she visited Mother's house before leaving for Darjeeling and met Swami Sharadananda, Golap-Maa, and Jogin-Maa. She got the intuition about her mortal death and told Gopaler-Maa about her strong intuition of never coming back to Belur. She had a heavy heart, consumed with the yearning to live for the mission of serving Bharat Mata as the true disciple of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. All the memories of the last thirteen years, when she entered Bharat in 1898, shaped and reshaped the consciousness of the disciple who gave her all to the mission. The day she saw the tall stature of her Guru at the railway station, the fading shapes of Indian unknown horizons, and losing Western lenses to see the men robbed in Gerrua and walking tirelessly with naked feet to cross the endless paths of the mortal self. All her fears of being in the unknown land of realizations were dashed to the ground when she saw her master, standing tall as king to direct the coming civilisations. She remembered the visit to Dakshineswar temple. Maa Kali engulfed all her fears and uncertainties and stood tall like her Master. "A day of days," as she calls, meeting Maa Sarada still fills her with enthusiasm and vigor to fulfill her master's dream of starting an educational revolution to guide Indian women. Bagh bazaar filled her eyes with a shine of divine realizations. She looked at the sky, and the moments of the past thirteen years shined like stars in the sky of Bharat, where she gathered all the clouds, manifested dreams through yoga as guided by her spiritual father and Guru, by working on *Karma, Raja, Bhakti* and *Jnana* Yoga. She kindled the spirit of Indians to give birth to numberless Niveditas. Nivedita learned everything in Bharat: meditation, the rhythm of breath, and the quintessence of worship; she wrote to Miss J Macleod on 18.6.1899:

Then we went on to Dukshineswar and stayed under the tree till after 10.

We also went into the room, and I laid my 7 roses at the foot of the picture. Fancy not seeing it again till I come back!

Under the Tree we meditated (M & I)

then talked-

then visited the room— then went back and talked again.

Meditated again-but I got very tired and went to sleep. Then, down to the boat where S. and I feasted on mangoes and M. would eat nothing, and go home. (Vol I *Letters* 143)

Before leaving Calcutta, Nivedita one day met the famous old dramatist Girish Chandra Ghosh, a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. Girish Babu was her neighbor. He was ill then but was writing his last drama,

*Tapobal*. Nivedita asked him to finish it soon so that she might read it on her return from Darjeeling. But she never returned. Girish Babu dedicated the book to her with these words:

Pure Nivedita, Child, you always rejoiced when my new dramas were staged. My new drama is being staged now, but where are you? When I was lying ill before you left for Darjeeling, you had tenderly said to me, "I hope to see you well again on return." I am still living, child; why do you not come to see me now? I hear that on your deathbed, you remembered me. Engaged as you are in the Lord's work now, if you still remember me, accept this tearful gift of mine. (Atmaprana 284)

During the last days of her life, in the abode of peace and mountains, she lived in Darjeeling at the Ray Villa. Her desires for exploration as a monk, philosopher, writer, and exponent of Ramakrishna Vedantic learning were endless. That blood-dysentery and ebbing away physical strength took the wings of her flights. Her compassionate gestures and spirit of "Lokmata", as named by Rabindranath Thakur, never left her. Then we see her sick and unable to do her work, followed by the final scene where her bier is carried in and laid down with reverence. We hear the voice of Rabindranath Thakur speaking out his final eulogy of a woman he called the *Lokmata* 'Mother of the people':

He who has seen her has seen the essential form of man, the form of the spirit ... She is to be respected not because she was a Hindu but because she was great. She is to be honoured not because she was like us but because she was greater than we.

As these soaring words are spoken with the utmost gravity and feeling, images of Margaret's life appear behind her bier, slowly moving from Ireland to India, from there to the Himalayan peaks, and finally up into the endlessly moving clouds above the Himalayas. (Qtd in Gayatriprana "Nivedita Go Bragh")

She could see her mortal end, but everything remains incomplete in this universe; she left many unfinished manuscripts, missions, documents, biographies, dedications, and anthologies but sowed the seeds of infinite Bunyan trees in Bharat to reap the fruits of immortal *Bhartiya Gyan Parampara* and *Vedic Darshan*. In a letter just before she died in 1911, she wrote to Mr. Ratcliffe on 14 Sept 1911, "I am by nature political... even religion is to me too much an instrument for throwing humanity into the furnace and remolding huge masses and areas of men! Sometimes I think I am altogether material and secular and haven't a grain of the real thing in me" (Vol 2 *Letters* 572-73); the conflict between "secular" and "sacred" was still going on at the end of her life.

In *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, Nivedita wrote about legends and stories from ancient Hindu and Buddhist literature, including the folklore of the Indo-

Aryan race, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, Krishna, Buddha, Shiva, and other legends from Puranas, epics, and Vedas. Nivedita and Coomaraswamy wrote the book in collaboration, it comprised illustrations, which were supervised by Abanindranath Tagore, with some pictures drawn by Tagore. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy wrote beautifully about Sister Nivedita in the "Preface" of the book:

Sister Nivedita, to whom the publishers first entrusted this work, needs no introduction to Western or to Indian readers. A most sincere disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who was himself a follower of the great Ramakrishna, she brought to the study of Indian life and literature a sound knowledge of Western educational and social science and an unsurpassed enthusiasm of devotion to the people and the ideals of her adopted country. Her chief works are *The Web of Indian Life*, almost the only fair account of Hindu society written in English, and *Kali the Mother*, where also, for the first time, the profound tenderness and terror of the Indian mother-cult are presented to Western readers in such a manner as to reveal its true religious and social significance. Through these books, Nivedita became not merely an interpreter of India to Europe but, even more, the inspiration of a new race of Indian students, no longer anxious to be Anglicised but convinced that all real progress, as distinct from mere political controversy, must be based on national ideals, upon intentions already expressed in religion and art. (Coomaraswamy and Nivedita v)

On the morning of October 13, she said, "The frail boat is sinking, but I shall yet see the sunrise." Her mortal body went beyond the cycle of life and death and met the divinity with the supreme glory of being the spiritual progeny of Bharat, who manifested the master's dreams. Hindu cremation grounds embraced her in the *Panchbhuta tattvas* of Bharat Mata, and the sacred funeral rites gave solace to the departed soul. Her *karmabhumi* covered her with utmost devotion, and the sound of Eastern horizons roared in the Western world; her teachings led to assimilation through the ties of practical Vedantic learning. Ultimately, as told by her Guru, 'Freedom' was the only essence. Nivedita wrote to Miss J Macleod on 9.8.1900,

You have been right about the greatness of the freedom Swami gives. Freedom to be oneself and to express Him in one's own way is the height of divine and human giving. Oh, how one's soul is beneath his feet! The infinite mercy of God that could clothe itself thus for our loving! (Vol I *Letters* 322)

Nivedita knew this was the end, and she bravely faced it. She had learned to consider life and death as the obverse and the reverse of the same coin; she was going beyond both.

Last funeral rituals by Gonen Maharaja from Ramakrishna mission, chanting, mantras, and ceremonies of Hindu traditions led to the creation of samadhi at

the sacred spot of her cremation; she was a *parivrajak*, wandered in the Himalayas to talk to God and whispered with mountains, got the courage of unshaken mountains, *hath* yogis and by blessings of monks, devotees, temples and ultimate consciousness. She once said, "Travelling with the master is a pilgrimage." She made the Himalayas her *Karma Bhumi* and met the divine in Bharat. Nivedita wrote to Miss J Macleod on 3.8.1899:

Oh Yum, the other night with Mrs F. and Miss G., he told me such wonderful things! He used to go into Samadhi, not knowing that it was when he was a little boy of 8! And I asked him about dying, and he had told me that he knew what it was like —and he said— "Twelve or fifteen years ago, in a little hut on the side of a mountain (in Hresikes) was Turiananda and Saradananda, and I. I was very ill with fever, and I was sinking and sinking gradually, and then there came a moment when I was cold up to my shoulders, and then I died away-and away ... and away ... and then I revived gradually. I had something to do ... When I came back, Turiananda was reading Chandi (about the Mother, a Puran), and Saradananda was weeping."

And I was talking to Turiananda about it, and he said it was a miraculous cure.

The night was dark and stormy, and at that awful moment when it seemed that He had gone, came a sannyasin outside the door, saying in a loud voice—"Fear not Brother", and he entered in and looked at Swami and said he knew a certain medicine that would cure him, and where it could be got. But it was far to go, and even as Turiananda was hesitating about leaving Him (for S. was sleeping, to be ready for his turn at watching) came another monk who volunteered to go and bring it. He went and came, and Turiananda gave the drug, and 5 minutes later, death gave place to life. He was there once more ... About the Samadhi, he spoke in explaining the Hindoo wish to remain conscious and call on GOD up to the last minute. "That picture that you end one life with begins the next" he said —and told this and his love for sannyasins as a proof. (Vol I *Letters* 163-64)

Death has spiritual connotations in Bharat; Nivedita saw death so closely that she could feel the rhythm of breath's music and yogic ways of experiencing death as a meditative journey. Swami didn't only teach her the secret of living; he taught the yogic way of dying, too. This was a transition, and she was not one with the divine until she realized the true purpose of life. Now, after discovering her passion for serving India, Swami guided her to have the courage of Kali to face the challenges and the heart of a mother to serve humanity. There is no death in the entire universe, but only life and we all live through each other; the mind remains forever, and thought is immortal, too. In the autumn, numberless leaves fall, but the tree's roots also give life to eternity through seeds. The men of supreme consciousness and yogic attributes don't seek acknowledgment and spread the rays of wisdom but don't claim for themselves and establish no schools of wisdom. Society is the driving force for worldly actions,

and morality is expected in all divine *Karma*, but the question arises: what is morality? What is considered ethical in one nation may be considered completely wicked in another. As Nivedita says:

Buddha died for smaller ends five hundred times before it was possible for Him to become the Buddha! Each time He forgot Himself, forgot life, forgot death, and became merged in the struggle, without a thought beyond. In the end, He had earned the empire of the world and had to renounce the certainty of that in order to mount the step beyond that made Him the vessel of compassion to the soul. (Vol III CWSN 526)

In 1911, Sister Nivedita's climb to her final abode was marked by a synthesis of her Irish legacy and deep connection to India. The ceremonies amalgamated the East and the West, merging her two identities. Nivedita left her mortal body on 13 October 1911 at Roy Villa in Darjeeling. Today, the villa is known as "Sister Nivedita's House," where she spent several years and ended her mortal journey on Earth.

A few days before arriving in Darjeeling, she had read a Buddhist prayer on Universal Love and Peace, which she rendered into English and printed for distribution to friends. Nivedita's life and work embody the strength of character and unwavering devotion to a higher cause, a legacy that continues to inspire individuals to this day. At her request, it was read out to her aloud:

Let all things that breathe, without enemies, without obstacles, overcoming sorrow, and attaining cheerfulness, move forward freely, each in his own path! In the East and in the West, in the North and in the South, let all beings that are without enemies, without obstacles, overcoming sorrow and attaining cheerfulness, move forward freely, each in his own path." As her mind was entering into deep meditation, she softly intoned her favourite *Rudra-stuti*:

"From the Unreal lead us to the Real! From Darkness, lead us to Light! From Death Lead Us to Immortality! Reach us through and through ourselves, and evermore, O Thou Terrible' protect us from ignorance, by thy sweet compassionate Face." On the morning of October 13, she said. "The frail boat is sinking, but I shall yet see the sunrise." As these words were said, a ray of sunlight came streaming into the room while her soul soared higher up upon the wings of Eternity. (Atmaprana 286-287)

Nivedita wanted to be cremated according to Hindu customs and traditions, immersed in the Ganges with the divine blessings of her Gurus, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Nivedita's funeral signified not only her Hindu life but also her Hindu death. Her body was the epitome of Hindu ways of life, robed in white and placed on a platform bejeweled with blossoms. The atmosphere was filled with chants, hymns, and Hindu rituals.

Once Nivedita wrote to Miss J Macleod on 18.6.1899:

“One morning this week, I saw the King, and he talked about the absurdity of my notion of Progress but told me to go on working as hard as I could—to get tired.” “Be a fanatic of Death-Margot!” he said, and so on. Wasn’t that glorious? (Vol I *Letters* 144)

Nivedita talked about death in the “Facing Death” article on *Religion and Dharma*: Different from either of these is the courage born of mother worship. Here, the embrace is death, the reward is pain, and the courage is rapture. All, not the good alone, is Her touch on the brow. All, not simply the beneficent, is Her will for Her child. “Where shall I look,” he cries, “that Thou art not? If I take the wings of the morning and fly unto the uttermost parts of the sea, lo, Thou art there! If I go down into Hell, Thou art there also!” (Vol III CWSN 420)

After the Hindu funeral rites, Nivedita’s body was taken to the nearby cremation ground. She was cremated according to Hindu customs. The ashes from her cremation were collected and later immersed in the Ganges near Belur Math, the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission, with which she had been closely associated:

As the procession proceeded, it swelled in size and became the largest and most imposing funeral procession ever witnessed on the hill station. The people in the marketplace stood in rows, and every head was uncovered as a mark of respect as the procession slowly and solemnly passed between them towards the Hindu cremation grounds. (Atmaprana 287)

Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were the saints to fathom the untouched depths of Indian consciousness. Their disciple Nivedita took their message to the West after breaking all the barriers of race, class, gender and country. She was a *Manas-Kanya* and disciple of Swami, a true exponent devoted to India and Vedantic learning. She used to say that a disciple is born before the birth of the Guru. A Guru reaches the farthest corner of the earth to sow the seeds in the darkness of ignorance. Ramakrishna was waiting for Vivekananda, and Vivekananda was waiting for Nivedita. While spreading the rays of wisdom, Vivekananda, a Hindu Yogi, a parivrajak, reached London in October 1895. Margaret Noble was fighting with conflicts; inner turmoil was unbearable. The faith she had followed since childhood could never satisfy her head and heart. She could never attain peace before meeting the Master of her soul. Nivedita said:

All is in mind. Nothing outside us has any power save what we give it. However imposing the external world may seem, it is, in reality, only the toy of the mind. It is but a feeble expression of what has first been thought. “All that we are is the result of what we have thought,” says Buddha; “it is founded on our thoughts; it is made up of our thoughts.” (Vol III CWSN 415)

Nivedita discussed Ramakrishna in the “Facing Death” article on *Religion and Dharma*: “Sri Ramakrishna,” said Swami Vivekananda, “never thought of being humble. But he had long ago forgotten that Ramakrishna ever existed.” This is the energy, and this the courage, of the Mother-worshipper. He who has realized the Infinite, of what shall he be afraid? Death is contained within him. How, then, shall he fear death? In what shall he think pain is different from pleasure? He has broken the great illusion. How shall it be of avail against him? Says George Eliot:

“Strong souls live like fire-hearted suns,  
To spend their strength in the farthest action.

Breathe freer in mighty anguish

Than in trivial ease.”

And the words ring true. For such is strength.

And such are the heroes who are born of Mother. (Vol III CWSN 433-34)

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