

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

SOURCE OF PERENNIAL INSPIRATION SWAMI GHANANANDA

Indians and Europeans thronged the Caxton Hall in London on 12th January 1953 to pay their homage to the memory of Sister Nivedita. The meeting was arranged by the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, London. The speeches delivered on the occasion were published in the March-April (1953) issue of the Vedanta For East and West. In this issue of the Bulletin we have reprinted all the five speeches delivered by five distinguished speakers only to remind ourselves of our indebtedness to Sister Nivedita and draw inspiration from her impeccable life of self-sacrifice. We have only added the titles.—Ed.

We have met here to-night in honour of Sister Nivedita, and to express our sense of appreciation of her great life and great work. She was born of Irish parents at Dungannon, Tyrone County, N. Ireland, in 1867. But as a young woman she settled down in London and was conducting a school of her own in Wimbledon. I have not yet been able to find out where the school was situated, or to locate the house in the West End of London where she first met the Swami Vivekananda in 1895 when he had come to England to teach Vedanta. I happened to meet her sister, Mrs. Wilson, in Johannesburg in 1947 when I had gone to South Africa on a year's preaching tour, and it was from her daughter, Miss Wilson, who is now no more, that I received all the volumes of the diaries of Sister Nivedita from 1898, the year of her visit to India, to 1911, the year of her death at Darjeeling. If we succeed in finding out the house in which she met the Swami and the house in which her school was located, we shall gladly take steps to put up tablets in honour of her memory with the consent of the owners.

Nivedita first passed through a period of opposition to the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, because they were entirely new to a Westerner, but she used to attend all his lectures and class talks with a view to learning. The Swami, however, was a dynamic personality: he patiently listened to and answered her questions. A change came over her mind gradually until she accepted him as her teacher, and even welcomed the suggestion that she might go to India and serve the people of the country.

In reply to her letter asking if she might go to India, the Swami wrote from Almora (Himalayas) on the 29th July, 1897:

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 especially.

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 or hatred and 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, and 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.

You must think well before you plunge in, and after work, if you fail in this or get disgusted, on my part I promise you I will stand by you unto death whether you work for India or not, whether you give up Vedanta or remain in it. 'The tusks of the elephant come out but never go back':—so are the words of a man never retracted. I promise you that.

It was about 41 years after the Indian Mutiny that Sister Nivedita visited India and began her work. Now it is over 41 years since she passed away. During the thirteen years of her work for India the British were not only vigorously applying their methods of administration and consolidation but also attempting cultural assimilation, besides aiming at the spiritual conversion of the people indirectly through missionary efforts.

Usually British women went to India as the wives of the members of the ruling class who in a short time became sun-dried bureaucrats. The women could have very well mixed freely, at least with the women of India, but they did not do so. They were not to blame, for they shared the cold indifference and contempt of their husbands—indifference to and contempt for the people, their culture, their philosophy, their religion and their great civilization—and the only aim of the latter was to run the machinery of Government. But Sister Nivedita lived with and served the people of India, which she claimed as her own. This is why Indians deeply loved and respected her. Probably no European before or since has aroused such deep and loving respect among Indians of all classes as Sister Nivedita.

In the thirteen years of her life in India, Sister Nivedita's work extended far beyond the domain of education alone. She was engaged in arousing the whole Indian people to an awareness of its own social, cultural and religious greatness as revealed in its history and tradition. Writing, lecturing, encouraging, teaching, nursing, organising famine and disaster relief work, leading the austere life of a Hindu nun, and withal maintaining a life of unflagging spiritual exertion, she inspired, and evoked unstinted admiration from the leading Indians of her time.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote of her: 'She lived our life and came to know us by becoming one of ourselves . . . Sister Nivedita has uttered the vital truths about Indian life.' He also observed: 'Surely I feel that one who has seen her and known her has seen with one's own eyes the glory of man's soul in a living body, the glory that declared its presence in all its indomitable energy by entirely shattering to pieces the gross integument in which it is wrapped. To see this with one's own eyes is surely the greatest good fortune that can ever befall a human being. We consider ourselves blessed because in Sister Nivedita we saw with our eyes the invincible soul of man manifest before us in a human body.' In the words of Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, '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 anglicized, but convinced that all real progress must be based on national ideals.'

It is a matter for rejoicing that the school which Nivedita started over 50 years ago, of which she was the Principal, and which has coached up thousands of students, celebrated its Golden Jubilee four weeks ago. This school, called the Nivedita Girls' School, Calcutta, is to-day a well established one, but in the beginning of its career it tottered for want of adequate financial support. It was then that she wrote some of her finest books such as *The Web of Indian Life*, *The Master As I Saw Him*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, *Studies from an Eastern Home* and others, and sold the copyrights for the benefit of the school.

May Nivedita continue to be a source
of perennial inspiration to India and the world! □

* Swami Ghanananda was the President of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre in London.