

NIVEDITA: RELIGION AND SOCIETY – AN IMPECCABLE ACT OF CIVIC SERVICE BY THE SISTER DURING CALCUTTA PLAGUE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

From women empowerment through basic education to the faithful companion of the renowned scientist, Dr. J C Bose, Sister Nivedita's contribution in the social and literary advancement of the then India had been phenomenal. Her primary task was, however, to propagate the views and religious thoughts of her Master, Swami Vivekananda, for whom she left her family and country to make India her permanent work field. It was not at all a smooth journey for her to translate the message of Swamiji into action as she faced hindrances because of the conservativeness, ignorance and illiteracy prevalent in the Indian society. Margaret arrived on Indian soil on 28th January 1898, when the outbreak of Plague was already raging the Bombay city. Within months of her initiation to Ramakrishna Order, Nivedita was found busy in the relief work of the Plague that had reached Calcutta from Bombay. Nivedita is thus equally remembered for her fearless and untiring service to our society in pandemic management as to her contribution in societal reforms. Her service to the society is steeped in humble submissiveness taught by her master and devoid of any arrogant romanticism, most often shown by the so-called social workers. The present article pays a warm tribute to the dedicated efforts of the 'Lady with the Lamp' during plague epidemic and seeks to draw inspiration from the sacrifice she made to manage the present crisis due to Covid19.

Key Words: Epidemic, Plague, Religion, Service

Introduction

Human civilization had been jolted by the outbreaks of diseases mostly belonging to the types of bubonic plague, cholera, small pox and flu claiming thousands of lives through the ages. The occurrence of bubonic plague (caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*) was found to cause widespread human mortality at regular intervals: the Justinian Plague (6th to 8th

centuries), the infamous ‘Black Death’ (1347 to 1351 AD) and the 19th century Plague pandemic to name a few. A series of plague epidemics also took place from 14th to 19th century in smaller scale. The London Plague in 1563 and The Great Plague of London in 1665 happened to be the two worst episodes after the Black Death of 1348, for which the city lost a substantial percentage of its population. The pandemic due to smallpox happened to be another killer disease till the process of vaccination was discovered by Dr. Edward Jenner in the year 1796. The deadliest Spanish Flu pandemic infected about one-third of the human population and claimed around 50 million precious lives starting in the year 1918 [1]. Like the ongoing Covid19 pandemic, the second wave of Spanish Flu was actually more fatal in claiming human lives. It is pertinent to mention that the second wave of Covid19 following the year 2020 happens to be more lethal in terms infection and mortality rate only in Indian subcontinent.

The Bombay and Calcutta Plague (1896-1899)

The deadly bubonic plague arrived in the summer of 1896 in Bombay and spread to other urban centers including Calcutta which was officially declared as infected by plague in 1898 [2]. Originating in Yunnan, China, the plague travelled across the country to Hong Kong, from where it arrived in British India and the spread rapidly to the port cities of Calcutta and Karachi, and further to Pune, the United Provinces, Punjab and other places. The first plague case in Bombay was detected by Dr. Acacio G. Viegas, in a patient in Mandvi on 23 September 1896. It is significant to note that the outbreak first occurred in Mandvi, an area close to the docks and home (even today) to warehouses, grain merchants and crowded localities. It was the population density of the Mandvi area, very much like the slums of Dharavi (a Covid19 hotspot today), which led to the surge in contamination [3]. The report of the first suspected case in Howrah prompted Alexander Mackenzie to appoint a Medical Board, which was formed by a resolution on 10th October 1896 to thwart the spread of the disease in Bengal [2]. In the absence of specific immunological test for detection of the bacteria-borne diseases in those days, it may be construed that Calcutta was not far away from the scourge of the pandemic that was raging the Bombay city during 1896 and 1897.



Flushing Engine cleansing infected Houses.

A ‘flushing engine’ used to wash down plague infected buildings, much like the disinfectant spraying carried out in Mumbai’s Covid19 containment zones (Photo Courtesy: Lentin 2020).



Whitewashing the Plague-affected House (Pic Courtesy – Monidipa Dey, 2020).

Margaret's Arrival on Indian Soil and Plague Outbreak

Miss Margaret Noble touched upon Indian soil on 28th January 1898 when she was received in person by Swami Vivekananda at the Kidderpore Dock. Margaret first met with Swamiji in the cold November afternoon of 1895 at the Lady Margesson's West End home in London [4]. The Bombay Plague had already taken its toll in 1896 much before Margaret's arrival. Such was overpowering Swamiji's call that she made up her mind to leave her family and homeland behind to meet the Master, without paying any attention to the safety aspect of her own life. On 17th February, 1898 Margaret paid a visit to the Brahma Girls School and got acquainted with the in-charge of the school, since the primary objective of her engagement in India was the spread of woman's education. Margaret made her first public appearance at the Star Theatre of Calcutta on 11th March 1898 in a seminar convened by Ramakrishna Mission and chaired by Swami Vivekananda. Introducing her to the audience, Swamiji described her 'another gift of England to India' [4]. Her lecture on the spread of Indian spiritualism in England enthralled the learned audience present in that meeting. Just after her initiation by Vivekananda into Ramakrishna Order on 25th March 1898, she plunged into a host of activities as Nivedita like visiting the lab of Sir J C Bose, giving talks at Kali Mandir, touring North India with her Master, attending religious lectures, opening of Girls' School etc.

In the very first year of her arrival, May 1898, plague struck Calcutta. Swamiji sought to create public awareness about the impending danger, which fortunately didn't assume epidemic proportions. Nivedita was advised by her Master to write extensively for the purpose, the Sister obliged by distributing pamphlets and making people aware of the mode of transmission of the disease. She found Rabindranath Tagore standing by her side for the noble act [5]. Families, both Hindus and Muslims started fleeing in panic, were reluctant to take plague vaccine in the misconception that it was intended by the British Govt. to cause harm to the natives. Few elite families like the Tagores came forward to dispel their anxiety, but of little help. An optional inoculation drive by the government making segregation unnecessary finally brought the situation under control. Nivedita had her role during plague outbreak, which was less innocuous in form as compared to its second edition in 1899, taking personal care of the infected patients and undertaking cleaning programme of the infested areas [5]. When the possibility of an epidemic subsided, Swamiji took Nivedita along with other Western disciples to North India tour during the summer of 1898, covering prominent hill stations of the Himalayas. On her return, Nivedita got busy to open the Girls' School, which was inaugurated by Sarada Devi on 12th November 1898, the auspicious day of Kali puja [4].

It is pertinent to note that in the numerous letters written to her near and dear ones, Nivedita was hardly found to take the credit for her involvement on the service she rendered during plague outbreak, “of course you have heard that Plague has broken out in Calcutta. Probably at this moment you get more up to date accounts than we, for newspapers are rare up here” – she was writing to Mrs. Eric Hammond just this from Almora on 5th June 1898 [6]. Her narratives are always dispassionate and unromantic when it comes to her own selfless sacrifice for our country. Sankari Prasad Basu in his *Letters of Sister Nivedita* has included this note, “Calcutta Notes –By an English Lady” as Appendix which gives a vivid picture of Calcutta in plague days of 1898. This note recovered among the papers of Sister Nivedita, was obviously written for some English newspaper or journal. Nivedita described how ‘crowds of tiny boats’ were moving through the Ganges from Calcutta side to the West ‘laden with the families’ for some safer places where there was no incidence of plague and the Segregation Act might be in full sway. This may well remind us about the great migration that took place in 2020, the first year of the Covid19 pandemic, and sprang many tales of starvation, exploitation and death. A vale of fear prevailed all around, even the servants staying in the apparent safety of Sister’s residence showed restlessness. As Nivedita went out of her home to meet a friend and took the Chitpore Road, no cab or tram were in sight in that part of Calcutta, the city wearing a deserted look with most houses were shut. Nivedita had given many such descriptions in that Note that may serve as an authentic document of the plague-affected areas of Calcutta [6] (Basu, 1982).



Pic Courtesy – Monidipa Dey, 2020.

Nivedita’s Selfless Service during Calcutta Plague

In the early part of 1899, the bubonic plague, returned to Calcutta with more vengeance, killing hundreds of people every day. Swamiji gave the ultimate priority to provide health care measures to all sections irrespective of religion and caste and engaged Nivedita and two of his monastic disciples for the purpose. Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod in a letter dated 12th March 1899, “Then we talked about the plague which is rife in this neighbourhood, and breaking out all over Bengal. A request for 2 or 3 ‘boys’ to nurse has come to the Math for some plague-stricken place. I urged the king to send” [7]. Nivedita went through the plague-affected localities to make a survey, and prepared list of the things needed; she opened a

makeshift dispensary for treating patients. The entire work was done so efficiently that when the government health official came to inspect the area, he found that everything needed had been accomplished long before. The volunteers raised money from the public by groups, distributed disinfectants to the houses. Nivedita had given the volunteers a new concept for civic life through the practice of self-sacrifice, joining hands with them for cleaning operations [8].

Moved by the deep involvement of Nivedita, the eminent Govt. doctor, R G Kar, in charge of treatment of Bag Bazaar area quoted, “During this calamity, the compassionate figure of Sister Nivedita was seen in every slum of Bag Bazaar. She helped others with money without giving a thought to her own condition. At one time when her own diet consisted only of milk and fruits, she gave up milk to meet the medical expenses of a patient.” Dr Kar also reported that he saw Nivedita nursing a child patient in a slum in Bagh Bazaar when he came one morning to see that patient. When he came to visit the patient again in the afternoon, he saw that Nivedita was still sitting with the child in her lap in the damp and weather-beaten hut in that locality. We will again describe the same incident from Nivedita’s angle in the following section.

Swamiji himself was so much impressed by the devotion of Nivedita during plague outbreak, that he appointed a plague committee comprising of Swami Sadananda, Shivananda, Nityananda, and Atmananda to advise Nivedita in her service. This committee observed that the root causes of the plague in Bagh Bazaar were lack of proper sanitation and general ignorance of the people. Nivedita and Sadananda, fondly called the ‘scavenger swami’ went all out to lead the cleaning operation. To meet the mounting costs of disinfectants and so on, Nivedita made an appeal to the general public and to the affluent ‘European Calcutta’ for raising funds. At the same time steps were taken to dispel the people’s ignorance about plague by teaching them basic ideas towards the prevention and tackling of the disease [9].

Some incidents that speak for Nivedita’s service during Calcutta plague have acquired the status of folklore. Nivedita was living at Bosepara Lane, Calcutta at that time. One night, hearing a loud wailing from a mud-house nearby, she rushed to see what was happening and found that a child in that house had just died. Sister Nivedita took the dead baby on her lap and remained seated silently for a while, a gesture that seemed to have lent solace to the bereaved family [10].

Now we can look at the famous incident, which Dr. R G Kar also reported, in her own words. Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod dated March 23, 1899 from her Bose Para Lane house at Bagh Bazaar, “But the great news of this week is that plague is raging here. An old Irishman-our district health officer –says 100 cases a day are probably the truth. Last evening the number of death-fires by the Ganges side is pitiful.”

“On Tuesday I nursed a case from 10 O’clock. He died at evening. It was not repulsive in anyway. Only a high fever with occasional delirium –a slight swelling –and a collapse of the heart from which he died most peacefully. Now I feel that this girl who died opposite me a few weeks ago died certainly of plague.”

Her intense motherly instinct was aroused when she continued, “I stole some of the love that he meant that last day for his mother. In delirium once he seized my hand and carried his own to his lips. He was a boy of 12 or 14. And often he looked at me and smile –and at the end – when he began in a paroxysm of delirium to say ‘Haribol’ I took it up and stood repeating it

and he with a look of relief and soothing, lay quietly back and gradually died –so that those words were the last in the poor child’s consciousness” [7]. True to her Master’s ideal, what she was receiving in exchange for her service became conspicuously evident from her narrative. Enduring the fatigue of sitting with the dying child for hours on her lap was trifle to her contentment she got by providing comfort to the child. She is really the Sister as well as the ‘Mother’ incarnate.

Nivedita was a versatile lady, capable of tacking so many things at the same time. In the letter written to Miss MacLeod on 5th April 1999, she was all praise for Sadananda for his excellent organizational skill in carrying out relief work, “The plague seems to be stationary-- . Our plan of cleaning on a large scale would be the only remedy, but who wd. carry it out. Even in our own Order where is there another Sadananda ? For this, as long as enthusiasm lasts, he has a genius. The gang loves him, the women welcome him, the children carry his opinion, and the men trust him. I just dread the day when he tires, but if he did I believe he would take it up again.” In the same letter she was revealing to Miss MacLeod about her growing friendship with the scientist, Sir J C Bose, ‘The event of the week has been my talk with Dr. Bose on Friday night. I love that man. He told me with some bitterness that he meant to school himself into calling me “S. N.” [Sister Nivedita] instead of Miss N. [Noble],’ and the argument with the scientist, as she was not able to accept the criticism about her Master, “I could have argued –but I thought the time for that was not yet” [7]

Interpretation of Nivedita’s Service in the Light of the Dynamic Religion Conceived by Swamiji

Nivedita accepted her Master’s teachings in her heart encapsulating the concepts of religion, renunciation and service and applied that when the dreaded bubonic plague broke out in the virulent form in Calcutta. Her approach represented an exemplification of her Master’s concept of dynamic religion –religion as active renunciation and selfless service for the good of others. “That is the goal to which I am leading you. You must unite within yourself the practical spirit and culture of the perfect citizen, with love of poverty, purity and complete abandonment of self. Those are the condition under which your faith will blossom,” Swamiji said to Nivedita [9].

Nivedita’s service during plague was nothing but the transmutation of dynamic religion, service to God in humanity and application of the noblest divinity in human beings. Indeed, Nivedita’s plague work was Swamiji’s dynamic religion, and practical Vedanta in the sense of application of the noblest of divinity in human beings. The secret behind her success was that she engaged her body, mind and soul comprehensively into the act of service. Her two months fight against the plague in the hot climate of Calcutta jeopardised her health and endangered her life, but she was relentless in her fight against the plague epidemic. Didn’t her Master say, ‘Sympathy for the poor, the downtrodden, even unto death –this is the motto’ [9]. Her service was not beshrewed with ostentatious display of publicity but pure to the extent that could propel one’s soul towards the almighty, the Advaita. Emulating her feat of self-inclusive service is synonymous with the service to mankind and service to God.

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