CHAPTER - 3

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In the previous chapter, it was shown that Nivedita perceived the beauty and meaningfulness of Indian life both in the city and in the village. It was discussed how the customs, traditions and practices of the people revealed to her a remarkable unity and continuity. It is only probable that one so deeply engaged in the study of the social practices of an alien society with an informed mind as Nivedita, not just in its elite expressions but in the beauty of the life of the common people as well, will not be content to be a mere recorder of the customs of the land; one can expect that the literature, scriptures and other records of the people’s thoughts and traditions will be studied for the light they throw on the beliefs and practices of the people. The present chapter takes up Nivedita’s appreciation and assessment of Indian law, literature and philosophy, and the educational system that developed and kept them alive. It also narrates Nivedita’s appreciation of the saints of India who lived the philosophy, with special reference to Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda.

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There is an interesting though brief study of the Laws of Manu in The Web of Indian Life. The Laws of Manu are an encyclopaedic model of how life is lived and should be lived, in public and in private, by untouchables as well as by priests and kings, by women as well as by men. For the philosopher Nietzsche the humane wisdom of Manu far surpassed that of the New Testament. The colonial British Government found the Manu Smriti to be of great usefulness in exercising control over the Indians as it would serve its purpose while seeming to follow their own
code of law. Feminists find it a text of domination of patriarchal Brahminism over other castes and over women.

But to Nivedita the ancient scripture represents the growth of custom over the years. Nivedita finds the Manu Smriti “throbbing from cover to cover with the passion for justice” (CW 2: 36), especially in its references to the rights of women. Nivedita avers that the Laws of Manu are no Acts of Parliament, decreeing the people to follow such and such customs; they are not “a declaration of an ideal towards which they strive” but are rather “the unconscious expression of the spirit of the people ... and represent conceptions which are often realized in life”. And for this reason Nivedita finds Manu Smriti “the most reliable foundation for a healthy criticism of Indian custom” (CW 2: 37).

One of the greatest proofs of the sharpness and accuracy of Nivedita’s perception about Indian culture is her appreciation of the place of the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, in the lives of the Indian people. She aptly describes them as the two national epics which are “the perpetual Hinduisers” (CW 2: 102); that is, they keep Hindus Hindu: they keep the Hindu spirit alive. And she notes how the atmosphere of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata forms one of the great educational factors in a Hindu woman’s life (CW 2: 404). But what is more significant is that, she realises that they belong to the realm of the greatest literature of all time the world over, possessing the perennial power of all great interpretations of life (CW 2: 103).

Nivedita finds the Indian national epics to be of singular value in possessing at once the power of religion “to give ideals themselves as motives” (CW 2: 87) and that of literature over human imagination in moulding human character. And
national custom has recognised the extent of these powers in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata so clearly (CW 2: 86) that Nivedita finds their propagation perpetuated by the unique Indian custom of the regular recital of the epics, which “is something of opera, sermon and literature all in one” (CW 2: 88).

Nivedita finds the epics presenting no story for our amusement, but laying bare before us the souls of their protagonists as they climb “from steep to steep of renunciation” (CW 2: 91). The epics are not preoccupied with events, but are devoted to a subtle analysis of motive (CW 2: 90). The poet-chronicler “seems to be describing great events; in reality he does not for one instant forget that he is occupied with the history of souls, depicting the incidence of their experience and knowledge on the external world” (CW 2: 97).

Commenting on the effects the epic will have on the minds of readers unaccustomed to the Indian cultural climate, Nivedita observes, “perhaps only those who are in touch with the national aspiration can fully understand the roundness and plasticity of its drama, but even the most cursory reader must be struck with [its] insight and delicacy” (CW 2: 91). And reading her account of the epics one would have no difficulty in placing her among the former group of perceptive readers.

The great hold the epics have over the imagination of the Indian people is rightly recognised by Nivedita. Translations and different versions of the epics, which are numerous in the country, are only new modes of expression for the Hindu reverence for Rama and Sita and Krishna (CW 2: 91). It is not the poets alone who have popularized the epics. What keeps them alive in the memory of the people is the constant telling and retelling of the story by “all those old nurses and grandmas on whose laps the poets themselves first heard the great tale; and it is their perfect freedom to give their own versions of each episode – as must any of us in recounting
actual happenings – that keeps it fresh and living and explains its changes of tint in the hands of genius". Nivedita terms this aptly as the “working of the communal consciousness on the theme” (CW 2: 92), which accounts for the varying versions of the epics. An instance of this working of the communal consciousness on the epics is the recent popular versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata on the television.

Spotting unerringly the ideal depicted in the Ramayana, Nivedita finds it to be “oriental rather than occidental” in that “it belonged to a conception of duty that placed society far above the individual, and made the perfect king seek the good of his people without any consideration for his own or his wife’s happiness” (CW 2: 92). That the claims of the individual could be so completely brushed aside shocks even Nivedita, who is generally able not only to appreciate but accept Indian ways of thinking in their right spirit. Speaking of the demand for a second and public trial of Sita, Nivedita writes:

we believe vaguely that the power to renounce distinguishes the human from all life known to us; but a conception of renunciation so searching, so austere, as this appalls us. It is clear that a commanding philosophy of self-discipline lay behind, or the poet’s hand could not have been so remorseless; but it is also clear that that philosophy was living in the heart and effort of the people, or Sita and Rama could not have been so loved.” (CW 2: 101)

Appalling or not, it is Sita’s renunciation that Nivedita’s mind is imbued with through and through that she refers to it at the slightest opportunity: writing of the final recension of the Ramayana in the Puranic age in Indian history, Nivedita characterizes Ramayana as the story of the love of Sita for Rama - Sita, before whose glorified wifehood, even “the renunciation and faith of the cloister grow pale” (CW 2: 139).
To her thinking, Bhishma, the main character of the Mahabharata, is, like Sita, a perfect example of selflessness. They both stand for the highest philosophy of India, which Nivedita recognizes to have been “completed long before the epics” (CW 2: 100). Nivedita never gets tired of reiterating that “that philosophy itself, we must remember, was directly related to the common life of common folk. Only this fact can explain the recognition and welcome of such conceptions by the whole nation” (CW 2: 101). Nivedita finds Bhishma placed in the noblest of paradoxical circumstances: “having set aside the privileges of parent and sovereign, Bhishma is made to bear to the full the responsibilities of both” (CW 2: 97). Elaborating on points that would strike as strange or incomprehensible to Westerners, Nivedita points out how in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Bhishma, even though he is filled with a supernatural assurance that his side must lose, “strikes not a single blow, either more or less for this consideration”. Similarly, Nivedita finds Krishna’s reaction, when both Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, and Arjuna, the most valiant of Pandavas and personal friend of Krishna, approach him for his aid, also to spring from a strange philosophical detachment:

Such is the calmness of his outlook on life that he submits the matter to a moral test. To one claimant he will give his armies; the other he will serve in person unarmed, he says, leaving the choice to themselves. It is clear that the man whose greed and ambition are plunging whole nations into war will not have the spiritual insight to choose the Divine Person for his champion, rather than great hosts. And he does not.” (CW 2: 98)

From the Mahabharata Nivedita cites the story of Shishupal, the enemy of Krishna, as “the most perfect expression of [the] reconciliation of opposites” (CW 2: 98). That even enemies of God go to salvation by their thinking much of Him is the explanation given by the chronicler. That is the mood that has characterized the whole nation all these years, concludes Nivedita (CW 2: 100).
The all-pervasive influence of the epics is aptly seized by Nivedita in these words: “They penetrate to every part of the country, every class of society, every grade of education” (CW 2: 101). In inimitable words Nivedita captures the value of the epics to Indians:

What philosophy by itself could never have done for the humble, what the laws of Manu have done only in some small measure for the few, that the Epics have done through unnumbered ages and are doing still for all classes alike. They are the perpetual Hinduisers, for they are the ideal embodiments of that form of life, that conception of conduct of which laws and theories can give but the briefest abstract, yet towards which the hope and effort of every Hindu child must be directed. (CW 2: 102)

Discovering the hidden springs of Hindu living to lie in perfect renunciation and inner illumination, Nivedita has no difficulty in recognizing that “these it is which give its persistence to Indian civilization through the centuries, and this is why no examination syllabus, no alien’s kindly inspiration, no foreigner’s appreciation or contempt, can ever hope to have one iota of permanent influence on the national education at its core.” And though it is a mark of supreme literature all over the world that it will be capable of infinitely varied applications, as is true of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Nivedita finds that they are “a treasure greater, because more greatly used than any Anger of Achilles, or Descent into Purgatory ...” (CW 2: 103).

There is no detailed account of the puranas by Nivedita as there is of the epics; but there are a few brief but brilliant remarks on them scattered here and there in her writings. Nivedita rightly recognizes that there are two types of scriptures in India:
1. those that deal with philosophical principles in the abstract. 2. those that illustrate these principles with stories and with many added features. It is to the latter class that puranas belong. To quote Nivedita: “Puranas are characterized by containing stories of the creation and destruction of the world, tales of the life and death of holy persons and avatars, accounts of their miracles, and so on. These elements are commonly mixed up, but can easily be disentangled” (CW 2: 136). In this regard Nivedita points out that the puranas have a parallel in the apocryphal gospels of the Bible (CW 2: 184).

By way of concluding her views on the theory of reincarnation, Nivedita remarks “mankind is for ever divisible into those who see and struggle towards such a goal [that is, the goal of reaching the vision whereby one is released from the wheel of birth and death] and those who are engaged in sowing the wind, and reaping the whirlwind, of Desire” (CW 2: 168). Those who succeed in their struggle are the saints and prophets and India is blessed with a great many of them in all the periods of her history – saints who not only showed people the way to God but succeeded in awakening the nation to a right appraisal of the duty before her. Scattered all through the writings of Nivedita one can find innumerable references to these saints and godmen of India – Ramanuja\(^1\), Meera Bai\(^2\), Ram Das\(^3\), Tuka Ram\(^4\), Kabir\(^5\), Chaitanya, to cite a few.

She dwells at great length on the achievements of Shankaracharya\(^6\), about whom she writes: “We contemplate with wonder and delight the devotion of Francis of Assisi, the intellect of Abelard, the force and freedom of Martin Luther, and the political efficiency of Ignatius Loyola; but who could imagine all these united in one person?” (CW 2: 142)
Nivedita appreciated to the full the blessed opportunity she had of being the disciple of a great saint and prophet of modern India and the beloved daughter of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, and hearing from them about the Saint of Dakshineshwar who was the main inspiration of the Ramakrishna Movement. It was her strong conviction that the opportunity was really a trust endowed with her, so that it was a sacred duty for Nivedita to record, for the sake of posterity, not only her veneration for them but also their actual teachings and her understanding of their national significance. And not only her guru’s words as he uttered them, but his look, his gestures, his voice, its tone, and their unuttered but unmistakable significance - in short everything that would render the saint real and living and human. One can see the same timeless immortality endowed by her pen in her accounts of the Holy Mother also.

Sri Sarada Devi (1853–1920), the spouse of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and a great saint on her own merit, was an embodiment of love and service. She was so large-hearted as to accept all people without distinction of caste, creed or nationality. About her Nivedita writes how she was wedded at five but forgotten by the god-intoxicated man till she was eighteen; and then when she came to him, and saw the rare and sublime state in which his mind always dwelt, where the thought of carnal pleasures had no room whatever, she granted readily without a moment’s hesitation the freedom from the bond of marriage that his spiritual state required, “asking only to be taught by him as the Guru” and lived in a building in the temple-garden, “at once nun and wife, and always chief of his disciples” (CW 1: 104).

Nivedita finds Sri Sarada Devi to be “Sri Ramakrishna’s final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood.” Ever conscious of the role of women in the rejuvenation of India, Nivedita asks, “but is she the last of an old order, or the beginning of a new?” No doubt, in her eyes, the Holy Mother holds in herself both
the consummation of the womanhood of the India of the bygone days and the possibilities of the new. For Nivedita is delighted to find in her not sainthood alone: “the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood” (CW 1:104). Nivedita had every reason to say so; for it was the Holy Mother who accorded full welcome to a foreigner like Nivedita to live in her house, silently defying customs of long standing. Writing about this event (which took place in 1898) exactly 100 years later, in 1998, Joan Shack, an American devotee of the Ramakrishna Movement, says: “in her unreserved acceptance of Nivedita in the face of age-old orthodoxy, Holy Mother fully accepted all of us in the West as her children” (CS 27).

But Nivedita found that the open-mindedness of the Holy Mother expressed itself in several ways, the chief of them being “her instant power to penetrate a new religious feeling or idea.... [which] has all the strength and certainty of some high and arduous scholarship”. By way of illustration, Nivedita describes vividly how the Holy Mother had no difficulty in understanding the real import of the Easter Day and the European wedding. At the request of the Holy Mother Nivedita and Christine gave a dramatic representation of the European wedding. Even Nivedita was not prepared for the effect the marriage vow had on the Holy Mother. “Oh the Dharmik words! The righteous words!” Exclaiming so, the Holy Mother “had them repeated to her” again and again (CW 1: 107).

Nivedita realizes the significance of the Holy Mother’s long pilgrimages and her long and arduous experience in administration, secular and religious, as practically the head of the Ramakrishna Order. To her the Holy Mother was a silent witness to the position of honour that a woman may rise to in the Hindu society (CW 2: 46). This was not due to her position as the wife of Sri Ramakrishna but because, as Nivedita realized, “her life is one long stillness of prayer” (CW 1: 106).
Yet for all the veneration shown to her by everyone about her without exception, the Holy Mother always considered herself as the loving mother of one and all, which, to her, meant that she must be the ever-ready servant of all, thus constantly engaging herself in household duties. And amidst all the vicissitudes of life, Nivedita found Sri Sarada Devi to “stand like a rock, through cloud and shine” (CW 1: 105). Nivedita’s assessment of the Indian woman as mother and widow derived much of its conviction from the constant living example of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi as an embodiment of the ideal Indian womanhood.

Devotion to guru, eagerness to carry out his will and a keen intellect that understood his greatness – this may be said to sum up the life and work of Sr. Nivedita. The high regard of this outstanding disciple for an extra-ordinary spiritual teacher can be seen in The Master as I Saw Him.

The foremost significance of Swami Vivekananda to Nivedita was of course as a spiritual teacher, as an awakener of souls. After coming to India Nivedita had learnt “that there is a certain definite quality …called spirituality….that the soul may long for GOD as the heart for human love…” (Letters 1: 13) Having seen these elementary truths of spirituality clearly, Nivedita longed for more and naturally turned to Swamiji for guidance. Nivedita discovered the uniqueness of the Master here: “Where others would talk of ways and means, he knew how to light a fire. Where others gave directions, he would show the thing itself”. Yearning love of god or anguished pursuit of the Infinite was no longer meaningless words when she saw them constantly exemplified in her Master (CW 1: 76). Nivedita saw that he was the embodiment of what he taught.
Certain features of Swami Vivekananda as a teacher struck Nivedita as quite remarkable. Swamiji’s practice of choosing his disciples for their sincerity and not for their capabilities; his belief that his disciples were inspired as much as he himself was; his method of teaching great truths by brilliant exposition, an eloquent silence, or by his mere presence; the freedom he gave to his disciples to the extent of not interfering with their liberty even to prevent their mistakes but pointing out the source of error later; the habit of being entirely impersonal in his relation to his disciples while at the same time being sincerely committed to their welfare – Nivedita saw these in her Master and understood them to be the marks of all great spiritual masters.

Nivedita was conscious, every moment of her life, of the incalculable value of her guru as a spiritual master to herself. But it is in recognition of his love of his Motherland, and not as a religious teacher, that she made herself “the servant of his love for his own people” (CW 1: 22). It was the worship of this Goddess, Bharata Mata that he exhorted all Indians to take up in the place of all the vain gods. Responding to this call as no other Indian born in India did, it is in preference of the service of this Goddess that Sr. Nivedita sacrificed the safety of the membership in the Ramakrishna Order and chose to plunge into a perilous course of independent action. Nivedita saw that as a patriot, Swamiji “was born a lover and the queen of his adoration was his Motherland.” The disciple employs an apt illustration to characterize her master’s extraordinary love for his motherland. “Like some delicately-poised bell, thrilled and vibrated by every sound that falls upon it, was his heart to all that concerned her.” It was not a blind love, for “he was hard upon her sins,” one of them being her want of worldly wisdom. But Nivedita points out how, “on the contrary, [none] was ever so possessed by a vision of her greatness” as he was. Perhaps with a conscious intention of shocking the proud sensibility of his English disciple, as much as of opening her eyes to the facts of history, he disclosed
to Nivedita how, “to him, [India] appeared as the giver of English civilization. For what, he would ask, had been the England of Elizabeth in comparison with the India of Akbar?” Exhibiting what appears to us now as a rare sense of contemporary history, he would ask, says Nivedita, “Nay, what would the England of Victoria have been, without the wealth of India, behind her? Where would have been her refinement?” (CW 1: 45) One is reminded of Disraeli’s words that, to the nineteenth century Englishman “India was a career” (Said Orientalism xii). Recent interpretations of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park (Said Culture 100-116) and of Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (Kundu 109-126) corroborate Swamiji’s view. “His country’s religion, history, geography, ethnology poured from his lips in an inexhaustible stream.” None was a witness to this as Nivedita was. And in beautiful words Nivedita portrays this saint’s love for the land of his birth:

Like some great spiral of emotion, its lowest circles held fast in love of soil and love of nature; its next embracing every possible association of race, experience, history, and thought; and the whole converging and centring upon a single definite point, was thus the Swami’s worship of his own land. And the point in which it was focused was the conviction that India was not old and effete, as her critics had supposed, but young, ripe with potentiality, and standing, at the beginning of the twentieth century, on the threshold of even greater developments than she had known in the past. (CW 1: 47)

Naturally this great patriot–saint will have a message for his countrymen and Nivedita heard him time and again scatter “those thoughts of hope and love for his race and for his country” (CW 1: 48). “I disagree with all those” Nivedita quotes him as saying, “who are giving their superstitions back to my people. Like the Egyptologist’s interest in Egypt, it is easy to feel an interest in India that is purely selfish….My hope is to see again the strong points of that India, reinforced by the strong points of this age, only in a natural way. The new state of things must be a
growth from within” (CW 1: 139) (emphasis in the original). In this new state of things, the pride of place must be given to Woman and the People. And Nivedita says that Swamiji regarded that his lot was cast for all time with the cause of Woman and the People. This does not mean that he was partisan in spirit; he was not for or against widow remarriage or similar social reforms. He was a worker at the foundations and hence his cry was “Arise! Awake! Plans grow and work themselves” (CW 1: 196).

The means of rousing women and the people, in Swamiji’s eyes was to give them education. “Only let Woman and the People achieve education! All further questions of their fate, they would themselves be competent to settle” (CW 1: 193). Swamiji had told Nivedita about his object as regards India as always being that of “making Hinduism aggressive.” The Eternal Faith must achieve this by becoming active and proselytizing, evolving the capability to make converts, to take back into her fold those of her own children who had been perverted from her, and to consciously and deliberately assimilate new elements (CW 1: 161). There never was any doubt in Swamiji’s mind regarding the realization of such dreams. Says Nivedita: “He never thought of his Mother-Church or his Motherland except as dominant” (CW 1: 127). For he had clear-cut views as to what constituted real growth. “You are quite wrong …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” (CW 1:126).

But intense as his passion for his own country was, he was truly a messenger of hope for the entire humanity. That message was the divinity of man and universal brotherhood. Nivedita was only too well aware of this world-mission of Swami Vivekananda and has given beautiful utterance to her understanding of that universal message.
As an Eastern teacher bringing the message of hope to a Western audience, it was obvious that to him all men were equal; his teachings sprang from an infinite compassion for all humanity. Nivedita writes: “in his classes, in his teachings [in the West], his one longing seemed to be for the salvation of men from ignorance. Such love, such pity, those who heard him never saw elsewhere. To him, his disciples were his disciples. There was neither Indian nor European there.” (CW 1: 36)

Objectively considering Swami Vivekananda’s mission as a whole, Nivedita finds that, as in the great life of Buddha twenty-five centuries earlier, “a double purpose is served in the great life of Swami Vivekananda – one of world-moving, another of nation-making” (CW 1: 157).

In this his world mission, Nivedita gives expression to the now well-known fact that Vivekananda was the first authoritative exponent, to Western nations, of the ideas of the Vedas and the Upanishads. “He had no dogma of his own to set forth. ‘I have never’ he said ‘quoted anything but the Vedas and Upanishads, and from them only that word strength.’” (CW 1: 157) (emphasis in the original).

And with a clear awareness of the striking contrast of that spiritual message to all that was hitherto known in Christendom, Nivedita sets it forth in words of great lucidity:

“He preached Mukti instead of heaven; enlightenment instead of salvation; the realization of the Immanent Unity, Brahman, instead of God; the truth of all faiths instead of the binding force of any one.” (CW 1: 157) The entire philosophy of Vedanta must be paraphrased to explain the truth contained in the above words. They at once speak for the boldness of the Master’s message and the clarity of understanding of the disciple.
In recalling the service rendered by her master to the West, Nivedita is thankful not only for the message but also for the messenger’s infinite mercy in throwing broadcast the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads amidst the so-called ‘mlecchas’ (or untouchables. Foreigners were considered so):

He, indeed, had the generosity to extend to the West, the same gospel that the Indian sages had preached in the past to the Indian people – the doctrine of the Divinity in man.... The life of externals, with its concentration of interest in sense-impressions, was, according to him, a mere hypnotism, a dream, of no exalted character. And for Western, as for Eastern, the soul’s quest was the breaking this dream, the awakening to a more profound and powerful reality. (CW 1: 169)

Nivedita recalls how, once when he was questioned about the old rule that truth is to be taught only to the fit, he exclaimed impatiently, “Don’t you see that the age for esoteric interpretations is over? For good or for ill, that day is vanished, never to return. Truth, in the future, is to be open to the world!” (CW 1: 169) In the hundred years since the publication of this book, Swamiji’s prophesy about the disappearance of exclusiveness, and his conviction “that there would yet be seen a great army of Indian preachers in the West, reaping the harvest that he had sown so well, and making ready in their turn new harvests, for the more distant reaping of the future” (CW 1: 37) are being fulfilled so completely that the thrill felt by those first seekers of the West like Nivedita when Swamiji’s message first reached them is to be imagined only with some difficulty.

It was not just an intellectual sharing of doctrines that Swamiji extended to the Westerners; his heart identified with them as much as it did with his fellow countrymen. It was his heart that spoke when he addressed the gathering at the Parliament of Religions in the simple but touching words: “Sisters and brothers of America!” But even in the West his sympathy was always with the despised
underdogs. Not only were the people of America his brothers and sisters, but equally so were those of Africa. Nivedita narrates how in some Southern cities of America he was mistaken for a Negro and refused admission to some hotels; but Swamiji never disclosed his true identity and quietly came out. When his wealthy American friends apologised and asked him why he did not reveal his identity, he exclaimed “What! Rise at the expense of another! I did not come to earth for that!” (CW 1: 153). By his words and deeds Swamiji was proving how pernicious race prejudice was. Nivedita says: ‘He was scornful in his repudiation of the pseudo-ethnology of privileged races. ‘If I am grateful to my white-skinned Aryan ancestor,’ he said, ‘I am far more so to my yellow-skinned Mongolian ancestor, and most so to the black-skinned Negritoid!’” Nivedita recalls how Swamiji used to refer to the numerous occasions in America when Negroes would share with him their confidences about race exclusion. Nivedita relates how once a Negro railway servant came to Swami Vivekananda, expressing his happiness that a brother of his had risen to such eminence as he and how, in token of his happiness, he wanted to shake hands with the Swami (CW 1: 153).

Swamiji always judged peoples and nations (as he did individuals) on the basis of their ideals and the strengths in their character (CW 1: 160). This was in marked contrast to the Westerners’ practice Nivedita was accustomed to. And there was the other habit of vigorously attacking any weakness or injustice in them while in the country and equally vigorously defending them in their absence. The feeling of identification with the country was so complete that he instinctively spoke as if he was one of them. What Nivedita said about Swamiji in an Indian context is true of him anywhere in the world: “He one-d himself with the people, before rising to his own greatest heights” (CW 1: 85).
When Nivedita writes about the beauty of the Indian home which was the creation of the earlier generations of Indian women as loving mothers or self-effacing wives or as obedient daughters or again as widows whose life was consecrated to God, even the Indian woman of twenty-first century can feel an unmistakable affinity with her forbears of hundred years ago. When Nivedita waxes eloquent over the Hindu's reverence for the cow or the Ganges or the beautiful as well as sacred spots of pilgrimage, one can still share her enthusiasm. The city-dweller or the country peasant, as well as the saint or the prophet as inheritor of the Mother of all Religions is also not incomprehensible. That great intellectuals of the past like Aryabhatta and Bhaskaracharya made remarkable contributions to the world in the fields of knowledge, Indians are very proud to admit. They take pride, again, in the fact that world-famous universities like Benares, Nalanda, Taxila, Nasik and Conjeevaram were active in their land in the bygone days.

But no one born in independent India, that is, after 1947, can ever visualize the system of education that activated these colleges and universities for discoveries and dissemination of truths far and wide in the vast land – a system of education which was effective yet different from the only system now known to them. The severance from the past seems complete in the field of education after the advent of the Macaulayan system of education in India. These latter-day Indians will have to take the company of Nivedita to discover what Indian colleges and universities of the past were like.

None of the well-known, common denominators of the present educational system of today seems to have had any place in the old educational system. Nivedita points this out in forceful words: “The New Learning takes little note of university
centers whose names are entered in no register, whose students are contented to work year after year for pure love of knowledge, without examination and without degree; where there is so little self-consciousness that no man ever thought of making a list of their names” (CW 2: 341). Yet, herein lies the great distinction of the ancient system, vestiges of which were still to be seen in India some 150 years ago. In the words of Nivedita, “if disinterested love of truth and inheritance of deep and complex knowledge be the distinction of a university, the New Learning with its great colleges and their immense resources may well bow its head before the seats of learning of the Indian past” (CW 2: 341).

That old learning had its own areas of specialization. “The South has kept the memory of the Vedas; Ujjain has held the palm in astronomy and mathematics, Benares in grammar, and Bengal in logic”. The contrast to the modern day schools and colleges, admission to which is a costly affair and for which there is such a scramble these days, is very sharp when Nivedita writes: “To any one of these, from the most distant parts of India, young students will travel, on foot for the most part, and beg, penniless, to be accepted by the chosen teacher”. The infrastructure, as far as can be known, seems incredibly insufficient to a modern observer. “A household of some fifty or sixty students, distributed over a number of mud cottages, arranged round a central tank, made up the college of a single teacher” (CW 2: 342). These were known as tols in Bengal, better known all over India as the ‘gurukula’. For “to the Brahmin even his house is a school” (CW 2: 341) and in the Bengali tols, explains Nivedita elsewhere, “a Brahmin lived with his disciples, studying and teaching. The ideal Tol (sic) consisted of a series of mud cottages with wide verandahs, built round a small lake or a ‘tank,’ with its cluster of bamboos, palms, and fruit trees. Poverty and learning were the inspiration of the community. These Tols (sic) formed the old Indian universities” (CW 2: 220).
Having completed their schooling in smaller but similar schools in their own town or village, students came to the colleges “when they were twenty perhaps and would often remain unmarried till thirty five”. These tols were so famous throughout India that Nivedita cites how she had heard of the tol in Vikrampore that at least three men from Maharashtra were admitted there (CW 2: 342). This is the ancient ‘gurukulavasa’. “Here in such Tols(sic) as this was lived out the great ideal of ‘Brahmacharya’ - the celibate student dwelling as a son in his master’s house” (CW 2: 343).

If this was the residential system of education, there were other avenues to test what was learnt in the gurukula, and one of them Nivedita describes as “wandering colleges” (CW 2: 220). These are

the vast assemblies of Sadhus, which occur once in every twelve years at Hardwar, at Nasik, at Ujjain, and at Allahabad; there are fixed halls of learned disputation, where for hundreds of years, Hindu philosophy has been discussed, determined, and expanded…. Here come the wandering monks from every part of India. …Here fresh voices of learning and devotion are able to win for themselves ecclesiastical authority. (CW 2: 219)

It is to these great Melas or vast assemblies that the ambitions of those Brahmin boys in the Tols were directed (CW 2: 220).

It is this wonderful native system of education that the coldly calculative Macaulay chose to blot out from the face of the land and almost succeeded completely in the effort. Modern scholarship has proved beyond dispute how Macaulay achieved it for the British Empire, as can be seen in Gauri Viswanathan’s Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India. But it is Nivedita with her sympathetic imagination who takes the reader to that old world itself and offers the valuable insight that “modern education brought new tests to try men by” (CW
2: 306). Has India failed in the test? Has she exchanged for the clerk-producing system one that produced cultured men and scholars and saints for good? One cannot tell. However, in one of her letters to her friend Ms Josephine MacLeod, Nivedita writes, evidently in a vehement mood, but nonetheless basically correctly, “India was absorbed in study; a gang of robbers came upon her and destroyed her land. Can the robbers teach her anything? No, she has to turn them out and go back to where she was before” (Letters 1: 435). Turning them out has taken place; going back to where she was before has certainly not been accomplished.

It could not escape the attention of a person of such deep intellectual capability as Nivedita that the vast complex of human achievement in domestic, social, intellectual, moral and aesthetic realms of life in India owed their flowering to their deep-rootedness in profound philosophical truths. And having been a close student of Swami Vivekananda’s teachings, Nivedita had a firm grasp of many of the philosophical concepts that were rather perplexing to many a sincere seeker of truth from the West.

The first thing she learnt from her master was that “religion was realization,” that it was fundamentally “being and becoming,” rather than mere theorizing (CW 1: 28). Where doctrines would be helpful, the Hindu intellect was not averse to theories. Hence Nivedita made sincere efforts to understand and assimilate Hindu metaphysical concepts like the concept of the Real and the Apparent, the theory of karma, of rebirth and of maya. Besides these metaphysical principles, Nivedita was deeply aware of the scientific basis of Hinduism and the theocratic nature of Indian life; above all, the concept of Dharma occupied the supreme place in her
consciousness. All her books, lectures and articles give ample proof of her outstanding success in her efforts to understand, assimilate and apply these ideas.

With Sr. Nivedita the call of renunciation was as powerful as the call to service of humanity with which India beckoned her. And if it was her “falling in love with India” (CW 2: 440) that opened her eyes to discover hitherto unseen beauties of the Indian civilization, it was the longing of her soul for truth that led her to find what India had to offer in the all-important question of the salvation of the soul.

Nivedita sees how India presents “knowledge undimensioned, untimed, effect of no cause, cause of no effect” alone as “unchanging bliss” (CW 2: 150). Nivedita knows Indian philosophy too well to miss the fact that this bliss is to be realized “now in this earth-life or never”. The innate greatness of this realisation Nivedita recognises to be the fact that “it must transcend and still the life of the senses, when the senses are most active; it must absorb and transmute the personal, when personality is capable of every eager claim”. Thus Nivedita wants to make it clear beyond all doubt that this realisation is a “living actuality” (CW 2: 151). This is Jeevan Mukti or Freedom in Life.

As it is in this life itself that one is to realize the final truth, it is this life that is to manifest the vision gained; and Nivedita points out that that vision will be in accordance with one’s past “language and discipline” (CW 2: 152). The paths that lead to this vision are known in Hinduism as the three ways of truth, devotion and good work (CW 2: 155). The path of good work is karma yoga or “the path of service in purity of motive” (CW 2: 152). Here the distinguishing characteristic is the purity of motive. The path of devotion is Bhakti Yoga that “consumes the barriers of individuality...[and] fuses all things in the one conception of the Beloved
and in which, finally, the self is forgotten and nothing is left save Infinite Love”. And Nivedita describes “Union by knowledge or Jnana Yoga” as the highest of all these paths towards realization. Describing the union by knowledge, Nivedita rises to the language of the mystics: Jnana Yoga is “an atmosphere of joy, all stillness, all calm, all radiance without emotion; [in which there is] the growing intensity of recognition, the increasing power of direct vision, and finally that last illumination, in which there is neither knower, knowing nor known, but all is one in Oneness” (CW 2: 154).

For the attainment of the goal of realisation, through any one of these paths, the aspirant is to possess perfect control over the apparatus called mind. Control of mind or concentration is Raja Yoga. Nivedita realizes that “concentration is its single secret, and real power is always power over oneself” (CW 2: 152). This is Raja Yoga, the king among the paths, as the followers of the other paths will have to achieve this concentration of mind to make any progress in their chosen path. When success is attained, “he who has attained, and remains in life, is called a Paramahamsa, or swan amongst men” (CW 2: 152).

Throwing the searchlight of the scientific temperament on the philosophical bases of Hinduism, Nivedita points out that the Indian mind is strictly scientific when it claims that there is no proof for the final truth of the above doctrine except in that of experience. “We cannot prove, save by making experiment” says India in effect, “but we can point that the accumulated observation of life goes to establish the tenableness of the proposition” (CW 2: 156).

And Nivedita considers that the greatness of India lies not so much in propounding such a lofty principle as in making it a common intellectual and
spiritual property of all. For this doctrine of Freedom in Life is no monopoly of the few privileged in India but “represents a national culture.” (CW 2: 156)

Nivedita adduces three factors as essential for an understanding and interpretation of human life. And she finds it an evidence of the greatness of Asiatic thought that India recognised all three. The three factors are 1. cause-effect sequence of happenings 2. the element of heredity in life; and 3. efficiency of the will. In the elaboration of these factors Nivedita finds that “the Hindu outlook is critical and scientific”. It is a combination of all the above factors that make up the Hindu theory of karma. As an example of this critical thinking, Nivedita elaborates on the Indian understanding of sin: there is no such vague and horrible thing called ‘sin;’ what is understood as sin is only “a clearly defined state of ignorance or blindness of will”. For Nivedita the message of hope in this theory is that sin is not unchangeable. “So surely as trees grow and rivers seek the sea will [this state of ignorance] sooner or later give place to knowledge…” (CW 2:162). Nivedita finds that in the “Hindu’s interpretation of our presence here” on this earth, “desire… [is] the creative antecedent” that has made life come to pass. Hence of life itself, Nivedita deduces, the efficient cause has been the human will. “Thus, life itself is a harvest reaped at birth. It is also the sowing of fresh harvests for the painful reaping of the future. Every act is as a seed, effect of past cause, cause of effect to come – Karma” (CW 2: 164).

This accurate condensing of the theory of karma is followed by an equally terse presentation of the theory of reincarnation. “The Hindu does not consider that a single life alone is to be accounted for. …[for] phenomena are cyclic… appearances recur… the starry Universe itself will wither like another flower. Clearly then the causes that have placed us today must bring us again; must, in the circling of infinite
ages, have brought us infinite times before. This is the doctrine of Reincarnation” (CW 2: 165). This is “the unending wheel of birth and death” (CW 2: 164).

Nivedita understands the correlation between the theory of karma and that of maya. If desire is the creative antecedent of all happenings, “what the victim of desire so constantly forgets...is the twofold nature of things, and their constant state of flux”. Without resorting to formidable technical terms like “Dvandva” Nivedita, grasping the essence of the argument, words it in terms that will be understandable to any sincere student who is willing to put in a minimum of intellectual effort to understand abstruse metaphysical concepts. And in the process she clarifies and disperses the abstruseness. “Good brings evil; wealth is succeeded by poverty; love is but a messenger sent before the feet of sorrow. The world of Maya consists of the perpetual alternation of opposites. Every desire carries its fulfillment, its decay, and its retribution hidden within itself” (CW 2: 165).

The theory of maya fascinated Nivedita when she first heard it from Swami Vivekananda in London in 1894. Elaborating on what she had heard from Swamiji, Nivedita writes, “By Maya is ... meant that shimmering, elusive, half-real, half-unreal complexity, in which there is no rest, no satisfaction, no ultimate certainty, of which we become aware through the mind as dependent on the senses” (CW 1: 27). Nivedita is not unaware of the possibility of misconstruing the philosophy of maya. Hence she points out that a clear understanding of the theory of karma and rebirth will be “a valuable corrective of slipshod misconceptions of the philosophy of illusion” (CW 2: 168).

Providing her own logical explanation as another corrective, Nivedita clarifies that, according to oriental thinking, only “that man who has in his own person, by some method of self-discipline, achieved a realization, compared to
which all that we know through senses is unreal, has a right to speak of the phenomenal universe as, to him, fundamentally an illusion” (CW 2: 168).

It is not surprising to see that to one who understood the central tenets of Hindu philosophy so clearly their practical application is obvious too. Nivedita sums up her account of the philosophy of maya and of rebirth in these words: “The effort to reach this [realization] remains...to the Oriental mind the one end and justification of existence, the one escape from the wheel of life…” (CW 2: 168).

The scientific basis of the Hindu religious practices and philosophy is something that draws forth the highest praise from Nivedita. She finds the scientific temperament at work in the humblest practices of the Hindu household as well as in the subtlest philosophy. As one of the examples of Nivedita’s discovery of the scientific basis of Hindu practices one may cite her description of how the Hindu girl is made to do puja and lavish endearments on the gentle domestic beast, the cow. As if her own assertion will not be sufficient to satisfy the skeptic West, Nivedita says “I was informed by so authoritative a body as the professors in the Minnesota College of Agriculture, U.S.A., that this procedure of the Hindu woman is strictly scientific. The cow is able to yield her full possibility of milk to a milker whom she regards as her own child” (CW 2: 55).

The other instance that impressed her much can be seen in her account of the dread seven sisters of smallpox and eruptions. It has been shown earlier how “a good deal of fine medical observation has been put into the curious old myth of the seven sisters” (CW 2: 373).
However what impresses Nivedita as a greater wonder is the scientific temperament that characterizes Hindu philosophy. She finds it evident in the following aspects of Hindu philosophy: the theory of the cyclic nature of phenomena, the triad of time-space-causation as their governing factors, the doctrine of karma, which is based on "the entire calculableness of law" and the fact "that the argument of Maya is compatible with, and tenacious of the severest scientific research", above all the unity of all things. Nivedita does not fail to notice that here all the experimentation is to be done by the inquirer "in his own person by some method of self-discipline" (CW 2: 168), that his mind is the laboratory as well as the thing experimented on.

The sense of assurance that arises from a rational temperament like the one seen in the Hindu, appeals to Nivedita much: "the Hindu mind seems always to have been possessed of the quiet confidence that all phenomena will yield themselves to a rational explanation. Since 'that which exists is One,' it is absurd to suppose an ultimate contradiction between the human reason and the universe" (CW 2: 163). This spirit of the Hindu bears great hopes and possibilities, especially to one who had been tormented by the wave of agnosticism that swept over Europe in the wake of Darwinism in the last decades of nineteenth century shattering the dogmas of the Church and bringing to an abrupt end the Christian myths of one's childhood. Comparing the Western approach to nature and the Eastern, in her talk "India Has No Apology to Make" Nivedita observes: "Western science is continually baffled and thwarted by the determination of her students to demonstrate the manifoldness of the Universe. She is set upon the determination of differentia.... But how is it on this head with the Indian man? ...[He will say] 'In India there is but one Science – the Science of Nature'" (CW 2: 457).
In the various periods of Indian history great scientific activity had been going on in psychology, mathematics, astronomy, surgery, chemistry, and physics; what is more, the fruits of this scientific research were shared with other nations also. “The law of gravitation was enunciated and discussed by Bhaskaracharya in the twelfth century. And the antiquity of the Sanskrit word ‘shunya’ for nought, together with the immemorial distribution of the system all over the country, conclusively proves that our decimal notation is Indian, not Arabic in origin” (CW 2: 229), Nivedita reminds her Western readers. She mentions how “De Morgan celebrated the solution at sight of certain hitherto uncompleted problems of maxima and minima, by a young Hindu called Ram Chandra.” She also adds in a footnote that Pere Gratry and George Boole were other distinguished Western mathematicians who were “indebted to Eastern systems” (CW 2: 228). But before the internationalization of the intellectual property, it was democratized in its own country of birth: the findings of the scientific research percolated to the masses as customs and beliefs hidden and clothed as religion.

In fact this impressive scientific activity of the Indians and the rational nature of Indian philosophy leaves Nivedita wondering “the deeper we go into the history of Hindu philosophy, the more perplexed we are that with its obviously scientific character, it should never have created a scientific movement of the prestige and éclat of that of the West” (CW 2: 227).

The reasons for the absence of any significant scientific activity at a time when Europe was bubbling with energy in that direction seem to Nivedita to lie in several factors. One is that India did not know what organization was. Another reason, according to Nivedita is that Europe allowed Science to rob the national life of all other intellectual activities for the sake of its utilitarian value, in its “fever for its mechanical applications.” India foresaw the “danger of a mercenary science” and
abstained from it. While appreciating them for this achievement, Nivedita feels that the Indians’ horror of the utilitarian value of science was “perhaps exaggerated” and resulted in the loss of the possibility of “incorporating a progressive science in a progressive civilization” (CW 2: 230). However, Nivedita is still hopeful that Indians will yet prove that their innate capacity for scientific work and enquiry had not been lessened in any way by its long abstention from the fruits of a mercenary science; for, Nivedita says that Indians have inherited two advantages from their Indian birth: 1. The vision of unity of all things 2. The power to concentrate on the question in hand, unmindful of and to the exclusion of everything else (CW 2: 457-8).

But Nivedita realizes that in spite of the relative non-development of science in India up to nineteenth century, the essentially rational nature of Indian philosophy has a great value for the world. “It is the perfect compatibility of the Hindu religious hypothesis with the highest scientific activity that is to make that country within the present century the main source of the new synthesis of religion for which we in the West are certainly waiting” (CW 2: 231). Hence in Nivedita’s eyes the scientific temperament and capability of Indians will manifest itself not only in scientific activity but also in the synthesis of Science and Religion.

Nivedita was not the author of any sustained philosophical treatise on Hindu philosophy or concepts like Dharma. But as a seeker of truth, and as a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, besides being a loving observer of Indian life, she had developed a clear understanding of the concept of Dharma and had her own contribution to add to it. She understood perfectly the various layers of meaning traditionally attributed to the term Dharma and was impressed that even the most
illiterate peasant in India knew it. In its most basic sense “it is the essential quality, the permanent, unfluctuating core, of substance, - the man-ness of man, life-ness of life, as it were”. In this sense Nivedita points out that its manifestations could be infinite: “it may assume any form, according to the secret of the individuality we are considering. To the artist his art, to the man of science his science, to the monk his vow, to the soldier his sovereign’s name, to each believer his own particular belief – any of these, or all, may be Dharma” (CW 2: 123). In this sense Dharma refers to the intrinsic quality of things. But broadly speaking, Dharma is understood by the writers of Dharmasastra, “not [to mean] a creed or religion, but a mode of life or a code of conduct, which regulated a man’s work and activities as a member of a society and as an individual and was intended to bring about the gradual development of a man and to enable him to reach ... the goal of human existence” (qtd. in NCV 186). It is with this sense of the word in mind that Nivedita says Dharma cannot be the name of the Hindu religion. It does not connote a creed.

Apart from its ethical and moral connotations for an individual, Nivedita says that there is a collective sense in which the term Dharma is to be understood. Nivedita’s elucidation of her idea of the collective sense of Dharma echoes the traditional definition as “Dharati lokan,” that is, “that which upholds the worlds”. Particularising it to the nation, Nivedita elaborates what Dharma is in this sense: “It applies to that complex action and interaction, on planes moral, intellectual, economic, industrial, political, and domestic – which we know as India or the national habit”. That Dharma, in this sense, was not a theory but a living faith with the people of India Nivedita illustrates beautifully in these words: “It was for this Dharma that the Rani of Jhansi fought. By their attitude to it Pathan, Mogul, and the Englishman are judged... by the Indian peasantry. As head of this system, Yudhishtira ... received the name by which the people know him to this day, of Dharma-Raja.”. And imbued with the sense of this Dharma Nivedita underscores the
significance of the charge of the dying Bhishma in Mahabharata as something meant not for Yudhishtira alone but for all the future sovereigns of India (CW 2: 123). In this broad sense Dharma is not individual or even social morality alone; to indicate its complex connotations Nivedita terms it aptly as “National Righteousness”.

The vastness of her conception of Dharma as National Righteousness can be gauged when she observes, “the religious system of Hinduism is only a fragment inhering in a vast social-industrial-economic scheme called the Dharma”. Adherence to Dharma in this sense does not demand allegiance to Hinduism, according to Nivedita.

If this is a truth that all those millions of minority communities who are living in the vast sub-continent of India should remember, Nivedita enunciates its corollary, which the state has to bear in mind: “It is this Dharma, in its large non-sectarian activity, that determines the well-being of every child of the Indian soil.” Understood in this light, Nivedita finds the word Dharma to be “an ancient name for national righteousness or national good.” That it was in this sense Indians understood it and still understand it is borne powerfully to Nivedita when she finds that “in the eyes of the Indian peasant, the sovereign himself is only the servant of Dharma. ‘If he upholds it, he will stay; if not, he will have to go,’ they all say when questioned” (CW 2: 235). But while appreciating the high place that Dharma occupies in the Indian peasant’s consciousness, Nivedita does not fail to discern the serious failure of the Indian people to apply the same logic to themselves. She does it for them and observes, with appreciable sadness in heart, “little do they dream, alas! that themselves and their children and their children’s children may be swept into oblivion also by that same failure to uphold!” (CW 2: 235) Solemn foreboding! One wonders whether Nivedita had in mind that other famous adage about Dharma, “Dharmo rakshati rakshitaha” “Dharma protects him who protects it.” Nivedita was
very fond of quoting the final blessings of Gandhari the queen-mother to her villainous son, Duryodhana, before the Great War, “yato Dharmastato jayah” “where Dharma is there victory will be.”

Nivedita’s understanding of Dharma and its significance for the nation as national righteousness holds great possibilities for both the East and the West. It is in the name of Dharma as National Righteousness that India is to achieve the unification of the vast land in its geographical, social, and religious variety; it is adherence to Dharma and not meaningless orthodoxy that is to save India in the present era from the threatening corrosion of age-old traditions by Western science and commercialism (CW 2: 237). A more detailed account of this point will be given in the fourth chapter.

It will be obvious to any student of the Indian society that in India the social, political, industrial, artistic and intellectual life of the nation has its basis in its religion and philosophy. Nivedita characterises Indian civilisation as essentially “theocratic” (CW 2: 223). In this it is like all ancient Asian civilizations. However Nivedita argues that the theocratic nature of the Indian society has several features peculiar to itself.

In the present day context when a nation is described as a theocracy, what is meant is that the State promotes that religion which is considered native to the soil so that followers of that religion get all the priority and benefits of the state’s governance, while those professing faiths other than the state-sponsored religion are relegated to the position of second-rate citizens. Amid this current situation in the international political scenario, India presents a peculiar phenomenon: while the majority of the population is Hindu, the President of India is a Muslim, the Prime
Minister is a Sikh and there are many Christians in key posts in the State and the Central Governments. The peculiarity of this situation does not belong to the twenty first century alone. Nivedita discovers it in the past history of India, ever since Muslim rule started in the country about thousand years ago (CW 2: 145). While being intensely religious, the Hindus have a spirit of tolerance towards people of other religions. The secret of this tolerance Nivedita discovers and calls it “the theocratic consciousness of the Indians.”

It has been pointed out earlier how Nivedita understood the Indian concept of Dharma, which is impersonal and beyond the purview of religion as a creed. The theocratic consciousness of the Indians springs from this non-sectarian nature of Dharma. Indians of older generations used to point out how a Christian or Muslim will be criticized for bad conduct: “As a Christian how can you do like this?” “Does it befit a follower of the Din to behave like this?” But the difference in the phrasing of the question by a Hindu will reveal his attitude: he will ask, “Is it Dharma or Nyaya (just or logical) for you to do like this?” Different forms and modes of worship of God are recognized in India as essential to answer the needs of the souls but they are not the ultimate Reality (CW 2: 232). In India living is regulated by religion but religion itself is Dharma, not a creed. Faithfulness to one form of religion does not preclude friendliness and sympathy with another.

Nivedita points out that an offshoot of this synthesizing, non-sectarian nature of Dharma is the other peculiarity of the theocratic consciousness of India mentioned in the beginning of this section: to it “the person of the ruler is always a matter of singular indifference.... the sovereign himself is only the servant of Dharma. Thus whoever was the master that an Indian statesman served, whether Hindu, Mussalman(sic), or British sat upon the throne, it was the minister’s duty... to use all his influence in the best interests of the people and his country” (CW 2: 235).
Another greatness of the Indian theocracy is that in it freedom of thought and knowledge is not violated by the priesthood, which confines its sphere of influence to social matters. In fact Nivedita feels that opinion is so free in India that religious propaganda is discouraged (CW 2: 227). This freedom is seen to operate in the field of knowledge also, so that no seeker of knowledge has ever been persecuted in India, as it happened in Europe (CW 2: 226).

The theocratic consciousness, though not interested in politics, is not opposed to social good (CW 2: 243) and had its say in “the great task of enforcing and extending the essentials of common weal” (CW 2: 236). In this and in its power to synthesise various disparate elements, Nivedita perceives the great opportunity not only for India but also for all humanity (CW 2: 243).

Nivedita points out that to the theocratic consciousness everything is sacred: “every simple act ... will possess a sanctity.... Her customs will become rituals. Her journeys will be pilgrimages. The simplest ordinances of life will be sacraments.... The political system is extraneous: custom is sacred so that a grammar of habit takes the place of legislation” (CW 2: 225-6).

Where politics is not the central factor of life, and custom sacred, priesthood will gain importance, exercising great influence upon the social and individual conscience. In these circumstances the essential weakness of a theocracy, according to Nivedita, is that “instead of subordinating the priesthood in national affairs to the recognized leaders of the nation” (CW 2: 237), it is apt to encumber the latter with the counsels of the former.
It is worthwhile to study what the appreciation of the differentia of the Indian civilization in such a comprehensive manner by Nivedita reveals. There have been many a sympathetic observer of India who have appreciated some one aspect of her greatness or other. But it seems worthy of special note that in one and the same person and in the short span of about sixteen years (1895 to 1911 - including the years in England from her first introduction to Hindu thought), not only was so much understood about the past glory of India but also a vital contact was established with the Indian people, leading to a serious engagement with their problems in the present and an earnest programme for the future. This extraordinary involvement with India is a direct result of the more extraordinary nature of her appreciation of India; hence it is now sought to account for that faculty of mind which enabled Nivedita to have a vision of India that is borne about by her writings.

Of her Master and his message Nivedita wrote: “...Hinduism itself forms here the subject of generalization of a Hindu mind of the highest order. For ages to come, the Hindu man who would verify, the Hindu mother who would teach her children, what was the faith of their ancestors, will turn to the pages of these books for assurance and light” (CW 1: 3) What Nivedita said of her Master with regard to Hinduism is applicable to her interpretation of the Indian way of life. Indians as well as people of other nations who read her Web of Indian Life and Studies From an Eastern Home will be transported to the India of nineteenth century, and know what Hindu life was like before modernization laid its ugly hands on it, before Western science and ideas of progress brought restlessness into the quiet dignity of Indian homes, before modern gadgets and home appliances turned physical labour out and changed the health of the body and mind imperceptibly; before British imperialism crushed the wonderful native system of education, replacing the national epics, the
puranas and the lives of the saints with modern-day novels and magazines; before women were anxious or forced by necessity to seek jobs that would inevitably absorb too much of their time, energy and inclination to devote their thought and loving care to the family; before the couple, usually both of them working, thought it necessary to send their mother to a Home for the Aged and be rid of an irksome burden. For, as K.S. Kshirsagar remarks aptly,

[If] Vivekananda explained India's religion to the West [and to his own countrymen], the difficult task of explaining the complicated social ideals and conventions of ancient India fell to the lot of Nivedita. What in the hands of an Indian exponent would have looked like self-defence, becomes in Nivedita's hands the [rare] achievement of entering into the [soul] of this ancient land of her adoption...in this difficult and delicate task her success can hardly have any equal. (NCV 171)

The secret of this uncommon ability to perceive the heart of an alien nation Nivedita herself points out as the training she received from her Master, who,

...brought the eye of a poet and the imagination of a prophet... He taught me also to sing the melodious song, in feeble and faltering fashion, it is true, but yet in some sort of unison with its own great choir, inasmuch as, with them I learnt to listen through the music even while following, for the revelation it could bring of a nation's ideals and a nation's heart.(CW 1: 112) (emphasis in the original)

When Swami Vivekananda sat on the last bit of Indian rock at Kanyakumari and meditated, it was not any vision of a personal God or the Advaitic truth that he saw; his vision was that of Bhārata Mātā Herself – a glorious consummation of the seven years of wandering over the length and breadth of India and of the brilliant illustration of all the theocratic ideals of ancient India in the
person of his master, Sri Ramakrishna (Life 1: 341). It may be claimed with justification on the evidence of her writings that it was a Bhārata Darshanam of a similar kind that Nivedita had; not in one sitting for meditation but every minute of her life and work in India. It is this vision of India that is eloquent in the pages of her writings. It is this discovery of India that is both the source and destination, the origin and culmination, of her uncommon dedication and her wonderful gift to humanity. It is by the power of this vision of Arsha Bharata or the India of the Rishis that Nivedita saw not only the achievements of the past but also the failures of the present and the potentialities for the future of India. Enabled by this vision she also discovered what so many Western eyes missed and why they missed them. And finally it is this vision that empowered her to awaken Indians themselves to India.