CHAPTER - 4

In Defence of India
Fired by her passionate love for India, Nivedita discovered the greatness of India. But she did not keep that discovery to herself. She wrote and spoke and worked tirelessly to make it known to Britain that India had been sorely misunderstood and ill-treated by the West, especially by Britain, till it realized that a champion for India had been born in the most unexpected quarters. Reflecting over her activities for India, Nivedita wrote to Josephine MacLeod: “I am doing nothing for India. I am learning and galvanizing. ... there is nothing to be done, except defence, I fancy” (Letters 1: 435) (emphasis in the original). But Nivedita’s defence of India was not the outcome of mere quarrelsomeness. Love of truth and an insatiable thirst to give utterance to her convictions once they are formed beyond doubt, as much as intellectual energy and a natural delight in argument impelled her to defend India. Above all she was speaking for the millions of voiceless Indians.

India was the greatest and the richest of England’s colonies and the imperialistic instinct of Britain firmly held the vast country under its iron grip. For this firm hold of Britain over India, several forces worked. Apart from the administrative machinery with its complex network of men, materials and institutions that operated in India, Britain sent a constant flow of missionaries and scholars who held religiously that it was the destiny of the white man to civilize the barbarous heathen. Moreover there was the strong public consent in England for the British exploitation of India; but more significant than even this was the constant circulation of public opinion in England about Indians being a morally and culturally inferior lot of people, whose low state of civilization justified British presence there. It is this Eurocentric public opinion, held for centuries in all earnestness that kept
alive the empire. It is this view of India, as a nation of depraved souls, steeped in obnoxious social and religious customs and practices, that had embittered Nivedita’s childhood days (CW 2: 14). It is against the accumulated force of this image of the Orient in the conscious and sub-conscious mind of the West that Nivedita had to defend India. Hence when, in her mature days, she found the truth to be so different from what was known so far, the voice of truth in Nivedita could not be repressed. For while the romantically inclined Orientalist’s discovery of the modern Orient was disappointingly different from the fabulous dream world popularised by the texts, in fact the story of a betrayed dream, Nivedita saw the difference to be refreshingly original and meaningful. The result was that the disappointed Orientalist plunged into a hearty attack of the East, which was flattering to his sense of his own superiority, while to Nivedita there was every reason to speak in defence of India.

Can the subaltern speak? Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak raises this question and after a long detour of Foucault and Deleuz on identity, interspersed with a lot of Marxian thought, and a thorough investigation of the social phenomenon of widow burning in India (the very nomenclature of the phenomenon not as the normally used term of ‘self-immolation’ but as ‘widow burning’ like ‘witch hunting’, shows the attitude of the speaker) arrives at the conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak. She reaches this conclusion with reference to the double subaltern status of woman in India as a part of the British Empire (Wedge 271-313). But it could be said with justice that in the context of the imperialistic enterprise, the entire population of the colonized nation were in a sense the subalterns who could not speak for themselves. Nivedita chose to be their spokesperson. If the imperialistic white man arrogated to himself the ‘noble’ role of civilizing the barbarous brown, here was the paradox (to reverse Spivak’s formation)1 of a white woman saving brown men and women from the dominating white world. Yet the subaltern did not remain speechless all along. The history of native resistance to British imperialism proves that the subaltern
could and did speak. But till independence was achieved it could be said with justice that the subaltern status of India continued. And one more voice was not too many. Nivedita added her voice to the general resistance from the Indians. That it was powerful and hard-hitting could be seen from the angry protests that rose from the imperial mother country.2

The emotional and moral force behind Nivedita’s defence of India is to be sought in three things. The first and the most obvious was of course her passionate love for India. But it is to be noted that this love of India, all-consuming as it was, and though it led to a vigorous defence of India, did not ring the death-knell of her love for Britain. In fact it transformed her love for Britain, because in her heart the fire of a love greater than both these was burning and that was her love for truth. What Nivedita says at the beginning of her talk on “Kali Worship” by way of explaining why she chose to defend Kali worship is applicable to Nivedita’s defence of India in general.

*I have been hearing of Kali-worship all my life* in terms not flattering to Kali or her worshipper, and now that I am in contact with the thing itself, I have a right to stand up and say that if the things I heard as a child were true, at least they were not the whole truth, and it is the whole truth that we should insist on having...” (CW 2: 419) (emphasis in the original)

She sought truth, not the triumph of a party.

This question of being truthful was almost an obsession with her so much so that even for the sake of defending India she would not utter a falsehood. In her efforts to enlist the support of Americans for helping India with their monetary contributions her only dread was, “lest, in putting my scheme as favourably as possible before the public, I should conceal anything that they might find out afterwards with surprise and a feeling of reproach. *This* I pray to be saved from
doing. For the rest I am not responsible” (Letters 1: 350) (emphasis in the original). She was not a salesman for India but a servant of truth.

This natural passion for truth of Nivedita had been nurtured further by her guru Swami Vivekananda: for, in the very first lecture that she heard from him, she had recognized his own adherence to truth. “As a religious teacher, I saw that although he had a system of thought to offer, nothing in that system would claim him for a moment, if he found that truth led elsewhere. And to the extent that this recognition implies, I became his disciple” (CW 1: 22).

Thus purified by this fire of love of truth, Nivedita dedicated her heart and soul to the defence of India, which dedication she knew was at the same time the redemption of England also. For in her eyes, as long as England persisted in the grave sin of keeping India under subjection, all that she, as an English woman, could do by way of redeeming England was to champion India’s cause, however infinitesimal it might be. The sense that England had to be redeemed is very strong in her and the second right she claimed for defending India (in the introductory remarks to her talk on Kali worship mentioned above) is that she wants to express public regret for England’s treatment of India “for the part which countrymen and women of my own have played in vilifying a religious idea, dear to men and women as good as they, and to utter a public hope that such vilification may soon end by the growth amongst us all of sheer good-will and sympathy” (CW 2: 419).

It was inexpressibly painful to her to think of the wrongs done by England to India and she felt that no amount of work in defence of India could set them right. In one of her letters to Ms. MacLeod she gives vent to the piercing pain she felt in this regard in a heart-rending cry “Oh! India! India! Who shall undo this awful doing of my nation to you? Who shall atone for one of the million bitter insults showered
daily on the bravest and keenest-nerved and best of all your sons?” (Letters 1: 435) She herself was to more than atone for it. For, she was at one with India.

Nivedita’s defence of India took several forms. First, she had to expose the deep-rooted misconceptions of the Westerners regarding the social customs and religious practices of the Hindus. Here it was mainly the missionary opinion she had to contend with. Secondly there were the scholars who, in the name of objective studies, were spreading false opinions detrimental to the formation of a right understanding of India among the Westerners. Thirdly, as offence is the best form of defence, not only in military strategy but in all areas of life also, Nivedita sought to show the weak spots in the Western civilization. The fourth aspect of her defence was not so much an attack as an attempt to take the truth to sympathetic people among the Westerners. And in her desire to educate the West about India, Nivedita did not leave the children of the West either. For them also she had a message from India through the cradle tales of Hinduism. This was the vast vyuha in which Nivedita arrayed her defence of India against the West. And finally, in addition to meeting the challenge from the West, she found herself in the peculiar position of having to defend India to a section of Indians themselves.

Nivedita undertook a tour in America and, later in England, where her one task was to dispel the ignorance and prejudices that prevailed among the Westerners regarding Indian life, customs and beliefs, especially about Indian women. Whether in America or in England, the missionaries were the same and worked to spread almost the same false ideas about India, which alone would justify their interference in the lives of people of other civilizations.

During February 1901, Nivedita was invited to Edinburgh, Scotland, to give lectures, where she had a tremendous challenge from the missionaries. They gave a
terrible account of India and her ways and even tried to restrain Nivedita from her right to reply. Nivedita realized that some deliberate grappling with missionary opinion had to be done and the result was the booklet *Lambs among Wolves: Missionaries in India*, which may be taken as a representative piece. The booklet is in three parts. The first part deals with Nivedita's ideas of an ideal missionary; the second part gives an account of the thirteen false charges made by the missionaries against India and Nivedita's reply to them; the third part analyses the character of the missionary. Of these only a part of the second part will be dealt with below in some detail.

It is incomprehensible to Nivedita that all the wild charges of the missionaries were taken to be truth and nothing but truth by the Westerners. Of course only "people ignorant enough to be imposed upon" believed them, but these were many and powerful. One example of a recurrent charge by the missionaries is that Hindu mothers regularly gave their babies to crocodiles in the Ganges! Nivedita comments: "Everywhere I have met people who believed this story, and I have never heard of a professed apostle of truth who tried to set the impression right" (CW 4: 518). In the absence of such an apostle Nivedita herself chooses to be that and with energy, intelligence and earnestness of spirit, answers that infanticide occurs in India, under pressure of poverty and responsibility, as it occurs in all countries; but that it is not practised there any more than in England; Nivedita points out that it is not lauded as a religious act; nor is it so common in India as it is amongst the English themselves. With her intimate knowledge of both the East and the West, Nivedita makes a cutting remark "There is no custom of insuring a baby's life for £5 when the funeral expenses are only £2, nor is there any infant mortality ascribable to the intemperance of mothers in that country" (CW 4: 518-519).
Besides the religious missionary, three other types of missionaries worked in India. They were the educational missionaries, the lady doctors and the occultists. Though Indians thought of these as their warm religious friends, Nivedita saw that the missionaries themselves behaved as if they would be held dignified only if they proved the rottenness of Indian customs. They had not a single good word to say about India. They had a lot more of criticism. Certain Indian social customs came up again and again for condemnation by the occultists: sati, infanticide, thuggism; these were discussed as if they were the most representative factors of Indian experience.

The great mischief done by the educational missionaries that roused Nivedita's indignation was that their work did not stand for social integration but rather the reverse. But in the imperial and colonial context of nineteenth century India it could not have been otherwise. It is worthwhile to remember the passage from Macaulay's speech of 2 February 1835 in the British Parliament quoted earlier in Chapter I (p.5). In this speech he expresses his intention of introducing Western education in India in order to shatter Indians' self-esteem and make them think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own.

This was what the educational missionaries were working for and this was what Nivedita realized to be the severest blow on India. That the missionaries' efforts had the desired effect enraged Nivedita and impelled her to defend India with renewed vigour. Nivedita quotes the instance of how a Hindu child educated in a missionary school learnt to talk disparagingly of Rama and Krishna, who are worshipped as divine incarnations in India (CW 4: 514). Nivedita proposes that the missionaries should recognise Rama and Krishna at least as national ideals, if not as incarnations of God like Jesus, and find out some way of representing them as great, while continuing their programme of social cohesion and amelioration. Nivedita
reminds the Westerners how the Unitarian view of Jesus Christ rejects the idea of Trinity but leaves much that it represents intact. When this integrating force does not operate in any sect, Nivedita warns that “the religion that tells a man that all he has hitherto held to be right is really wrong, is bound to do social mischief – incalculable social mischief—since the learner is almost certain to infer that in like manner what he has hitherto held to be wrong is right” (CW 4: 516). That was exactly what the empire wanted to achieve and the last thing the British government or its agents would listen to in this regard would be the warning from a British woman against the social disruption it would cause in India.

As to the medical missionary, the lady doctor deplored the medical and surgical darkness of the Indian villagers. And the Indian custom of isolation of a woman at the time of childbirth seemed horribly inhumane to the lady doctor. Nivedita says that to her (Nivedita), who has observed it in close proximity, there is nothing but elevated medical culture in the custom. It is for the absence of this very practice during the occurrence of plague and other infectious diseases that the Indians are blamed. Nivedita emphatically puts forward the idea that in these and similar customs, as well as in those caste regulations regarding bathing, what is evident is the fact that there were “very clear and distinct ideas of bacteriology at their inception,” and that they demonstrate rather “their hygienic desirability” than otherwise (CW 4:520). The complete inability of the modern European medical system to appreciate the value of tradition and mother wit is lamented by Nivedita. One will only agree with her that it has already resulted in almost the complete destruction of that tradition; and it is with great difficulty that other more organized scientific medical systems native to India like Ayurveda⁶ and Siddha⁷ manage to survive till this day, if only as alternative medical systems, while allopathy is ruling the day.
But what Nivedita finds seriously annoying are their animadversions on the position of women in India. In a single speech to which she listened once, Nivedita heard thirteen charges made and supported. Nivedita proceeds to give all the thirteen charges and answer each and every one of them categorically. Three of these charges will be taken as illustrations of Nivedita’s earnest and intelligent application to the point in question. The three charges selected for illustration are (1) that women in India are deliberately kept in ignorance; (2) that the Hindu widow lives a life of such misery and insult that burning to death may well have seemed preferable; and (3) that the Hindu widow is almost always immoral (CW 4: 522).

To the first of these charges Nivedita makes the reply that it is the incompetence of the observer that makes him put forward such a charge. It is clear to her that illiteracy is the form of ignorance referred to here. Hence she provides several proofs of Hindu woman’s knowledge as she (Nivedita) knew them: 1. her ‘knowledge of housekeeping’ 2. her ‘trained common sense’ 3. the fact of her being ‘saturated with the literary culture of the great Epics and Puranas,’ and 4. the fact that ‘the best managed estates in Bengal are in the hands of widows,’ whose opinions were invariably respected by even lawyers (CW 4:523).

To the question of the misery of widows Nivedita dismisses every statement yet made by a protestant missionary as something made in complete ignorance of the bearing of the facts. Nivedita argues that Hindus are a people amongst whom the monastic ideal is intensely living. In their eyes the widow, by the fact of her widowhood, is vowed to celibacy and therefore to poverty, austerity, and prayer. Hence her life becomes that of a nun and if she is a child widow, her training must lead to the nun’s life. Nivedita emphatically denies that the widow is regarded by the Indian society with aversion and contempt, but asserts that the reverse is the case. The widow takes precedence of married women, as one who is holier. “We may
regret the severity of the ideal,” Nivedita concedes, but adds, “we have to recognize here, as in the case of monogamy, that it indicates intensity of moral development, not its lack. It may bear hard upon the individual, but redress cannot lie in a lowering of standards; it must rather consist of a new direction given to the moral force which it has evolved” (CW 4: 526).

Here it is necessary to recognize that Nivedita was defending a social custom that was criticized not only by the British but also by many Indians. And the view that the imposition of a life of renunciation on the widows is inhuman and unjust is not uncommon in India today, not to mention the question of sati or self-immolation by the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband.

There was a vast spectrum of writing on the problem of self-immolation by widows of some classes in some parts of India. For by no means was the custom universal in all parts or all classes of India. Hindu reformers and nationalists, the Hindu orthodoxy and British administrators, not to say the missionaries, the innumerable travellers and literary men – all spoke about it and vociferous claims were made about the barbarity of native men with the implied self-righteous feeling that imperial rule was justified. Scriptural sanction and a religious tradition were constructed by the British administration in India in collaboration with the Hindu orthodoxy (Loomba 167) and then it moved on to a prohibition of the custom as a benevolent humanitarian act from them. There was a sharp increase in the number of satis immediately after the legislature banning sati was passed in 1813. Ania Loomba points out how this desperate defence and revival of the custom has been interpreted by modern scholars as a form of native resistance. But she recognizes this form of native resistance to be “deeply oppressive of women.” (169) In fact Gayatri Spivak suggests that sati came to be valorized and perpetrated by the orthodox chiefly because according to Hindu law the widow would inherit the
property of her deceased husband and the men did not want the property to leave their hands! (Wedge 300)

Now Nivedita has nothing to do with such interpretations. Whenever she mentions the controversial custom of sati, it is with admiration bordering on awe that she does so. It is perfect fearlessness, according to her, and a fervent hope of rejoining the beloved dead husband that is behind the widow’s desire for self-immolation. But she takes care to explicitly say that the courage and fealty of Indian women are not to be shown in that form in these days: here is her dynamic orthodoxy at work. Praise it to the skies she may, Nivedita does not want the custom to be revived in its old form. That courage should “find new utterance and expression in the world-shaking crises of future ages” (CW 3: 67). In other words, the woman who feels called to sacrifice her all at the funeral pyre of her husband should rather restrain that impulse and channelize it in the nation’s cause. Like the widow, the prospective sati-mata is not to die but to dedicate herself, heart and soul, to the welfare of the nation. Nivedita leaves her stand in no doubt when she makes the following reply regarding the role of reformers.

But Ram Mohan Roy was indubitably right when he took any means that lay to his hand to forbid women in future that liberty. The patriot admires the heroic wifehood and admires also the lion-hearted reformer. Hinduism has appropriated, in this matter, the labours of the agitator. Hindus know well that his stern prohibition must be eternally enforced. They hold only that in his person - original as was his impulse, national as was his whole upbringing - it should be recognized that a Hindu and not foreigners, put an end to the custom. Ram Mohan Roy’s was the apostolate. The response of his own people was the sanction. All that foreigners contributed was the assistance of the police, on definite occasions” (CW 5: 83).
About the last charge (that Indian widows were immoral), which is the most serious of all, Nivedita says that it is grossly untrue. To her it is beyond doubt that “the chastity of women is the central virtue of Hindu life” (CW 4: 524).

After answering the charges individually Nivedita analyses them as a whole and finds them to possess certain features. “These thirteen charges fall into three different groups: (a) statements which are absolutely and entirely false; (b) statements which are the result of misinterpreting or overstating of facts; (c) statements which may be true of certain limited localities, periods, or classes, but to which a false colour has been given by quoting them as representative of Hindu life in the whole.” The last group seems to be the most important to Nivedita for two reasons: “in the first place it has an air of seriousness and security which goes far to give credibility to the whole argument, and in the second it furnishes a complete exposure of the method of making up evidence” (CW 4: 526).

Apart from the falsehood of the charges, what pains Nivedita as most outrageous is the fact that the missionaries have grossly violated the confidence placed in them by Indians. The bitterness Nivedita feels in this regard is evident:

The only class of Europeans who have been admitted to Hindu homes at all, and have made a business of reporting what they saw there, have been the Protestant missionaries, medical and other... In all lands doctors and clergymen see the misfortunes of the home, and professional honour keeps their lips sealed. But here all has been put upon the market. (CW 4: 528)

Working for the empire, which they construed as working for God, the missionaries were willing to go to any extent in their dealings with the natives. No wonder that Nivedita felt they were betraying their professional honour.
It is astounding to know in all their ramifications how earnest and thorough-going the English were in the matter of empire. The varied nature of the resources put to use, different types of intellectual effort brought to bear upon the resources, the attempt to co-ordinate all these in the interest of the empire and the enormous success they achieved in this—modern scholarship has brought to light a bewildering wealth of information in this regard. Edward Said and after him a host of postcolonial critics have worked on the mechanics of the empire. All this was employed for the subjugation of India (of course this was the story in all the colonies, whether in Africa, America or the Far East, irrespective of whether it was Britain or France or Spain that was the colonizer) and to keep her ever dependent on England, all the time furnishing the materials for British comforts. The particular aspect of the imperial machine to be considered now is the contribution of scholarship to empire-building and the opposition to such effort from Nivedita.

Ever since the East India Company started its operations in India, many officials of the Company had shown interest in the Sanskrit and vernacular literature of India. The Bhagavad Gita was first translated into English under the auspices of the East India Company, to which Warren Hastings, the then Governor-General, wrote a preface. There were many British scholars who were devoted to a study of Sanskrit literature. H.H. Wilson, Monier-Williams, and Max Muller are some of the more famous among them. The work of these scholars—Orientalists—was a strong reinforcement to the work missionaries were doing. They differed from administrators like Macaulay who were vociferous in driving out native forms and modes of knowledge and implanting English literature and modern science in Indian education. Gauri Visvanathan has proved beyond doubt how the introduction of English literature was one of the masks of conquest that the British Empire put on in India. The Orientalists on the other hand claimed that Indians were not uncivilized as the missionaries supposed them to be. Yet they were in full agreement with the
administrators and the missionaries that Indians needed to be "elevated, enlightened and Christianised" (Shourie 152). And the means of achieving this was to allow the Indians to have their education in their vernaculars and in Sanskrit and through the medium of Sanskrit to bring them to the noble doctrines of Christianity, which, they had no doubt, would bring an end to the superstitions and weaknesses of the Hindu religion and social practices. Ultimately it was the administrators like Macaulay and missionaries who won in the controversy and, while the government maintained a judicious attitude of secularism in the government run schools, the missionaries were given full freedom and support to carry on the work of Christianisation of Indians through their schools. It was shown earlier how Nivedita pointed out the incalculable social mischief done by the educational missionaries in India. Though Nivedita did not have the occasion to direct her intellectual attack on these Orientalists, there were other types of scholars the conclusions of whose scholarship Nivedita felt bound to oppose. It was not religion or social custom that was the bone of contention this time: it was Indian art.

The theory that the sculpture of Indian Buddhism was derived from the West was put forward by Western scholars in the first decade of twentieth century. The authoritative exponent of this theory was Prof. Grunwedel, who expressed his views in this regard in his book Buddhist Art in India. Nivedita was herself a connoisseur of art and was in active touch with art-critics of her times like E.B. Havell and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and influenced many young Bengali artists like Nandalal Bose, Suren Ganguly, Asit Haldar, and Abanindranath Tagore. She encouraged these artists to give up imitating the West and find their inspiration in ancient Indian art. With such an interest in and knowledge of Indian art, it is only to be expected that Nivedita answered Prof. Grunwedel. Nivedita contradicted Prof. Grunwedel's views by a thorough investigation of his theory in the light of the existent facts as seen in the sculpture found in the ancient abbey of Ajanta. Her
answer to Prof. Grunwedel on the Gandharan influence in Indian Buddhist art was given in a scholarly paper “The Ancient Abbey of Ajanta,” published in 1910 in “The Modern Review.”

Nivedita is very well aware of the fact that India has been the target of a great many very depressing theories, aimed at her in the name of candour and truth, which deserve only a response of light-hearted amusement at their preposterousness. But the attacks are too many and too frequent to be dismissed with indifference, and Nivedita feels that India has a great need of the vision of herself as she really is. Only self-awareness in the right perspective of her past can give her self-confidence to create a future worthy of that past. Towards this purpose, as well as to answer Prof. Grunwedel, Nivedita chooses to answer a very ignoble argument regarding the supposed derivative nature of Indian art.

In clear and unambiguous terms, Nivedita records her view that so far from the sculpture of Indian Buddhism having been derived from the West, it was the spontaneous creation of India and the Indian Buddhist mind itself. She further clarifies that Magadha, the modern Bihar, was its source and prime center and that from this point it radiated in every direction to exercise great influence upon other nations and provinces, including Gandhara. It is the special object of her paper to show this fact. With many a reference to the structure of the Chaitya halls or the statue of Buddha himself or to artistic details like the flying Devas, the wheel, the lotus, the halo, and the dress of the sculpture in the Ajanta caves, and to the differences in these details in different caves, Nivedita argues that an artistic style will ordinarily arise from the place in which it is found. By way of illustration she shows how it requires no argument to convince us that Titian was the product of Venice. However, to this rule, India has so far been an exception because the study of her past has been carried out by foreigners. Nivedita feels that the German
professor’s book, which is a mine of material on the subject, would have presented a
different conclusion had the professor visited India at least once and seen the places
and gained first hand knowledge. The German professor is assisted in his view by
two other scholars, Fergusson and Vincent Smith. Nivedita finds this fact worth
mentioning because it serves to remind Indians that “even in a matter which has
seemed so fixed and determined as this of the Gandhara influence on Buddha types,
we really have to deal rather with a strong and cumulative drift of opinion or
prejudice or preconception … than with established facts” (CW 4: 67). This passage
has been quoted to show that Nivedita exhibits a rare perceptiveness regarding the
Empire and its ways, which reminds one again and again of Edward Said. There
seems to be a conspiracy of scholarship at work to prove that India had nothing to be
proud of in her past or present and Nivedita senses it keenly. But the formidable
nature of the consensus of opinion by various scholars does not dismiss the need for
examining that opinion, says Nivedita, but challenges us to examine it. Nivedita
takes up that challenge. With various arguments, which are uncommon in their
technical details, Nivedita proves conclusively that “Gandhara was a disciple and
not a guru in the matter of religious symbolism” (CW 4: 67).

Nivedita did not merely din into the Western ears in unvarying monotony
how they were doing gross injustice to Indians but also showed up some of the
skeletons in their cupboards. Imperialism, the dangers of a mercenary science,
absence of freedom of thought, and the failure of Christianity are some of those
grave inadequacies that Nivedita writes about constantly in her works on India like
The Web of Indian Life and Religion and Dharma.

It could be said with justice that Nivedita was rather ‘imperialistic’ before
Almora; but once her eyes were opened to truth, she had no difficulty in developing
a keen sense of the implications of the British presence in India. She understood
perfectly that in the country of her origin, society gave its consent to overseas expansion, which was derived from the selfish forces that direct imperialism and utilized “the protective colours of... disinterested movements such as philanthropy, religion, science, and art” (Said Culture 12) to its own imperialistic ends.

Her accurate sense of European history enables her to see through the contemporary political situation as the left-over of the Roman impulse of organized force. She describes the Roman impulse as “working itself out by the energy of barbarian peoples ... tempted to aggression by the very habits of their life,” Nivedita seems to be reminding Westerners, who called others barbarians, that they were not different. “Physician! Heal thyself!” To continue the quotation: “Today the Roman Empire is represented by some eight or ten emulous peoples and princes, all armed to the teeth, all bent on appropriating the world” (CW 2: 224). If this is the general picture of European imperialism, the brief but accurate picture has its final touches in the following terse and poignant phrases; Nivedita defines the true meaning of empire, which is especially true of the British Empire in India: “Rome instituted, and modern Europe has inherited, the idea of one people exploiting another, under rights strictly defined by law, with an appearance of order which would deceive the very elect” (CW 2: 224) (emphasis added).

She had herself once been deceived by the rhetoric of freedom and the white man’s burden of civilizing the heathen; but now the scales had fallen and, having known the truth, she had no hesitation in giving a piece of her mind to the world. For, the organized brutality of the Empire stunned her. What was happening in India could best be described in the words of Edward Said:

In India ... ‘a mere 4,000 British civil servants assisted by 60,000 soldiers and 90,000 civilians (businessmen and clergy for the most part) had billeted themselves upon a country of 300 million persons.’ The will, self-confidence, even arrogance
necessary to maintain such a state of affairs can only be guessed at, but…these attitudes are at least as significant as the number of people in the army or civil service, or the millions of pounds England derived from India (Culture 10)

Of course, ninety years before Said, Swami Vivekananda had made it clear to Nivedita how the prosperity, refinement and civilization of the English had been made possible only by the Indian wealth and the Britishers’ unscrupulous arrogance in appropriating it to themselves through means foul rather than fair. “… we see England the most prosperous Christian nation in the world … with her foot on the neck of 250,000,000 Asiatics” (New Discoveries 1: 112).

The blighting effects of the Empire on all aspects of Indian civilization are accurately described by the Sister:

The process by which the peoples of a vast continent may become mere hewers of wood and drawers of water…is already well afoot. Their indigenous institutions are all in decay. Their prosperity is gone. Some portion or other of their immense agricultural area is perpetually under famine. Their arts and industries are dead or dying. They have lapsed into mere customers for other men’s cheap wares. … Nor does the education at present offered promise any solution of the problem. It is the minimum that is possible to the efficient clerk, and even that minimum is undergoing reduction rather than increase. (CW 2: 234-35)

A truer picture of the profit motive of empire, its organized form of exploitation, which is all the more brutal and selfish for its organisation, and the sad plight of the imperialised native could not be drawn in fewer words with such perspicacity.

If the moral responsibility for imperialism lay as a dark shadow on Europe, the domestic picture did not show any way out. Nivedita laments that in Europe science has absorbed all the intellectual energies of the West to the detriment of art
and literature, that in these departments Europe in the first decade of twentieth century was “living almost entirely on the treasures of the past” (CW 2: 229). Nivedita probes into the true motive of European community in the all-absorbing interest in science: “the true secret of our elimination of every other intellectual activity in favour of science, is it really the depth of our enthusiasm for knowledge, or is it not rather our modern fever for its mechanical applications?” (CW 2 230)

One cannot doubt that Nivedita’s answer is that it is the latter that is the compelling force. The later decades of the twentieth century have proved the Sister prophetic; in addition there is the still graver danger of the destruction of humanity through the threat posed by nuclear weapons. In her times it was still the mechanical applications and the commercial possibilities of science that were fascinating the western hemisphere. Nivedita feels that the material and financial advantages of the scientific activity have impaired that very scientific activity itself by narrowing it to “specialisms” and driving away synthesis. For, they only apparently benefit the society, whereas they are really the products, in the apt words of Swami Vivekananda, of a “science that can give us only bread and clothes and power over our fellowmen, science that can teach us only to conquer our fellow-beings” (CW 3: 370). To Nivedita the chief loss that has arisen from the commercialization of science is the fact that the “actual profundity and disinterestedness of our scientific ardour” has become questionable; and she comes to the conclusion that Europe can be said to be truly scientific only if “our love of knowledge continue to drive us on to a still deeper theoretic insight” (CW 2: 230). But the inevitable historical process is on and one of the impacts of Westernisation that is the contribution of the Empire is that the spirit of mercenary science that Nivedita is so relieved to find India to have escaped, has her now in its grip in the form of Enlightenment. Industrialisation and scientific progress have the sway.
Another unsettling effect of Western science is the agnosticism born of scientific activity. Swami Vivekananda summarises the idea beautifully when he says: “As step by step science is progressing, it has taken the explanation of natural phenomena out of the hands of the spirits and angels” (CW-SV 3: 423). But this consequence of science, while having been a general social phenomenon in the nineteenth century, had been a most crucifying personal experience to young Margaret and hence she explains it in poignant terms. Nivedita traces the cause of the rupture to the popularization of the idea of evolution by Darwin. “Doubt and agnosticism became common property…. The scientific movement has done that. It has given us a power of discrimination and tremendous passion for truth. But in the last ten years or so, a change seems to have been manifested…. They [scientists like Huxley and Tyndall] begin to suspect that their view is but partial…” (CW 2: 398).

The accuracy of this summing up of the scientific activity in the nineteenth century by Nivedita is borne out by the following description in The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought published in 1990:

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries no development has had more far-reaching consequences for religious faith than the discovery of the profound affinities between human life and all the rest of life. … the discovery was in fact a rediscovery … which came in considerable measure from … the Darwinian theory of evolution. Because of the emphasis placed, especially in various Western religions, upon a literal interpretation of the authoritative traditional accounts of the special origin of the human race, Darwin’s assertion in his “Descent of Man” that there was a biological continuum between man and the lower forms of life seemed to be a threat to the idea of a special creation in “the image of God.” But after the initial shock was worn off, there were many who began instead to see in this biological continuum the confirmation of a perennial religious insight” (Pelikan 236 – 38).
Sr. Nivedita points out one more weakness of Western science. It is the inability of Western scientific community to form any valid conception of the unity of the universe. “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” (CW 2: 457).

In the above two respects, Nivedita is happy to find that Indian science and religion have safely moved out of danger. It is a glory of the more-than-5000-year-old civilisation of India that the danger of a mercenary science “was always foreseen … so that from the beginning the disciple has been required to seek knowledge for its own sake, renouncing all ulterior motive” (CW 2: 230). As to science breeding agnosticism, in India there is the unheard of phenomenon of an agnostic or materialist being accommodated in the main stream of religion and hence the question of agnosticism endangering religion does not arise at all. Nivedita writes: “The Charvaka system of philosophy, one of the orthodox schools, is a purely agnostic formulation. I have myself met a Charvaka on a pilgrimage. His statements of belief sounded like a mockery of the people about him. The word “orthodox” here only means that by adopting Charvaka doctrines, a man does not cease to be called a Hindu” (CW 2: 226). As to science dislodging mythology, Nivedita asserts that Indians knew the value of mythology and as such neither condemned it nor gave it the value of literal truth:

In spite of its seemingly vast mythology, the actual content of Hinduism is infinitely less dependent on mythological ideas than any other religion whatsoever, not excepting Christianity. He who is driven to abandon the historicity of Western belief has no spring ground upon which to stand. Not so the Hindu. There is no shade of the search after truth that is not looked upon here as religious heroism.” (CW 3: 386)
This takes us to the question of the absence of freedom of thought.

Comparing the Indian and Roman civilizations, Nivedita is surprised to discover the extra-ordinary phenomenon in the East of a priesthood that never interfered with knowledge in any form. All that she had known in the history of Catholic Europe was the existence of a social system that was entirely opposed to the liberality of the East. In a tone of mockery that is devastating in its gentleness, she describes the condition in Catholic Europe that was hostile to a free pursuit of knowledge. “In Catholic Europe a man might scarcely venture to believe that the earth moves; must apologise for enjoying the cosmic speculations of La Place; could hardly study Plato without grave suspicion.” The cause of this phenomenon Nivedita traces with a fine historical sense to the Roman influence. In adopting the Asiatic religion of Christianity, Rome assimilated so many of the religious impulses of that religion of the East. But, while a priesthood that is entirely content to restrict the society in social matters and tolerant in acquisition of knowledge was natural to the soil of India, “the crude temper of the old imperialism betrayed itself primarily against mind and thought, which it conceived as the legitimate sphere of its authority” (CW 2: 226). Thus “in Christendom, knowledge has been so much feared that men have again and again suffered torture and death for no other crime” (CW 2: 227).

To one deeply religious by nature as Sr. Nivedita, the emotional dependence on Christianity had been so great from her childhood that her later disillusionment brought untold despair, doubt and suffering. With her keen perception she recognized where it had failed and recorded her perceptions. The first point where it had failed has already been pointed out in the section on the Absence of Freedom of Thought. The second failure of Christianity, Nivedita points out to be its inability to influence its adherents with an ethical principle that is sufficiently powerful to be a
controlling power over European imperialism. "Christianity, moreover, has been further discredited by the discovery that its adherents possess no ethics sufficiently controlling to influence their international relations." The third failure of Christianity, according to Sr. Nivedita, is a direct consequence of the second: it is that Christianity has been discredited "by that worship of pleasure which an age of exploitation necessarily engenders." The bleak situation is aptly summarized: "Thus neither the sentiment of childhood, the reasoning of theology, the austerity of consciousness, nor the power of idealism has been strong enough to maintain the creed of the West against the assaults to which the age has seen it subjected."

Protestantism seems to offer some hope in its "love of naked truth which finds its voice and type in modern science." But the failure of science itself has been pointed out above. And Nivedita has one more ground to add to its failure: "But, even in this [that is, the love of naked truth], the environment of spirituality and the communion of saints are apt to be left behind with the Medieval Church" (CW 2: 231). Religion as ethics and mystic communion with God, as reservoir of moral and spiritual potentialities – this is what an earnest soul like Nivedita's seeks in religion, and, in spite of the unalterable sublimity of the life of Jesus, she comes to the inevitable conclusion that Christianity as a formulated religion has failed to meet the demands of modern man.

At the level of the doctrines of the Christian theology, the views of Sr. Nivedita have reached us only through her letters. On 30 May 1900, Nivedita writes to her friend Josephine MacLeod that she had to give a lecture on what the Orient has done for the West. She talks it over with her friend in the letter and, because of the non-availability of the original lecture, the "talking it over" in the letter has to be taken for consideration. "The idea of Christians that Salvation is not a great universal fact of human life, but something only to be found through the medium of their Church or their Creed" seems to Nivedita to be "a possible blasphemy". But
the unfortunate thing is that instead of being recognized for containing possibilities of blasphemy, the idea "has been a mental safe-guard, a boundary," that has ensured the Christians "the highest possible development of their creed’s influence on their thought and aspiration." That it could inspire highest thought possible for Christendom is wonderful but to consider that there is no other means of salvation for humanity does not seem tenable. Nivedita finds the historical origin of this position in the fact that the Romans, who received the religion from the East through the Greeks, could not assimilate the ideal in its entirety, and the result was that in the long run, it resulted in "militarism and imperialism" (Letters 1: 351).

Doctrines like the original sin and redemption, the concept of the immaculate virgin, the resurrection of Christ in the body -- which usually puzzle followers of other faiths -- are not touched by Nivedita.

It must be remembered that in the days of her own religious search in her youth, Nivedita had been influenced by free thinkers like Frederick Denison Maurice, who was expelled from the King’s College for expressing his disbelief in the eternity of hell.

While the missionaries and the average prejudiced Westerner roused the combative instincts of Nivedita, it was not always a pitched battle that Nivedita had to face everywhere. There were sympathizers too. One memorable occasion when she was amidst a sympathetic audience was when she spoke to the Sesame Club at London on 22 October 1900. Nivedita had been instrumental in her England days in the formation of the Club. Here she spoke on “New Interpretations of Life in India.” The speech is remarkable for two features. Being in the midst of sympathetic listeners, Nivedita is in a relaxed mood, and the tone of the entire lecture is one of quiet confidence in the audience matching her firm conviction in the subject.
The second remarkable element is that it is Margaret Noble speaking about the experiences of Nivedita. Not that they were two different persons. It is, no pathological case of a split personality but the supremely sane and self-possessed genius of a woman who was able to move in two worlds with perfect sympathy for both. What is evident throughout the speech is her love for England, which is as immense as that for India. If only three years ago, Nivedita deserved the harsh rebuke of her master that patriotism like hers was a sin, that ignorance so determined was wickedness. But with the stains on her patriotism - namely race prejudice and ignorance of the truth about India’s greatness and Britain’s part in maligning it - now gone, Nivedita could see both India and England in the proper perspective.

The Nivedita who was standing before the members of the Sesame Club that evening was the dwija. In India one who is invested with the sacred thread as a mark of his dedication to the study of the sacred Vedas is called a dwija. The initiation into the Gayatri mantra at the time of the ceremony gives him a new birth into a world of celibate studenthood devoted to study of the Vedas and service to the guru. For Nivedita it was a birth into a new consciousness about India; the deity for devotion and concentration was not the Veda Mata that the brahrnacharins of yore worshipped in the forest universities or gurukulas but that Mother India who had seen her children reach heights of glory in the past, who were now wallowing in abject poverty and misery, that Mother India to whom her life had been dedicated.

The long preamble given by Nivedita before she enters into her new interpretations about India establishes the one question that is preoccupying her mind: how can England prove her nobility in India? For Nivedita still believes in England’s destiny, which is not the destiny of England as conceived by the average Britisher of her days - the destiny of civilizing India; it is one of “falling in love with
India," as a sure means of building the English Empire. And in unambiguous terms Nivedita defines what kind of love it is to be:

if we go with love, with the love that ... desires the good of India as we desire the good of our own children, to transcend our own, that India be stimulated into self-activity by us, if we go with this love, then we build up the English Empire by sure ways, and along main lines, whether we imagine ourselves to be serving England or India or Humanity. For the love of England and India is one, but no love ever seeks its own. (CW 2: 441)

Nivedita is here dreaming of an ideal empire of love, a utopian love that will unite all humanity for all eternity; a love that will transform imperialism into a truly universal enterprise divested of all desire to dominate. But perhaps questions like how many will be capable of such an ideal love, whether in the situation that obtained then in England such an attitude was possible do not seem to agitate Nivedita's mind. Now she makes clear what she means by British Empire: "The words 'British Empire' mean neither more nor less than the British opportunity to choose the noblest part ever played in the great drama of the world" (CW 2: 442).

It is after this long preamble that Nivedita starts telling her audience about her experiences in India. Contrary to all her fears and imagination, it was one of uniform sweetness and helpfulness. Setting out on an educational mission in India, of establishing a school for girls, Nivedita imagined her study of India as taking place in mud huts, on journeys barefooted across the country, amongst people who would be completely hostile to my research. ... What did I find there? Instead of hostility, I found a warmth of welcome. Instead of suspicion, friends. Instead of hardships and fatigue, a charming home, and abundance of the finest associations" (CW 2: .443).
And all associations of barbarity with the native Indians known to her in Britain turned out to be completely untrue. Nivedita tells them how the only instance of her seeing a drunken man on the street was in the European quarters, and never in the Hindu quarters (CW 2: 445). The reason for the high morality and decorum of Indian life Nivedita attributes to the influence of the national epics and to the reverence paid to women, especially to the mother. Thus Nivedita’s new interpretations of life in India turn out to be new interpretations of a gospel of universal love, of an imperialism based on love, a high sense of honour, race prestige and service of humanity.

As one reads this speech of Nivedita, expressing her anxiety that those who go to India should serve her with love and sympathy, one is reminded of Max Muller’s lectures to the ICS candidates of the Cambridge University in 1882. In the series of lectures by Muller, the same anxiety to bring about an understanding among Britishers going to India, can be seen. Max Muller is grappling with the commonly held British prejudices that every thing in India is strange; that Hindus are an inferior race, that all Indians are liars. He desires that all such international condemnations ought to be deprecated (32-34). It is astonishing to see that prejudices die hard. These were the feelings all who had to defend India to the West had to contend with. Nivedita was no exception.

One of Nivedita’s “greatest gift[s] to modern India is her interpretation of India’s ancient and baffling social institutions,” writes K.S. Kshirsagar in his illuminating article on Nivedita as “A Rare Interpreter of the Indian Way of Life” (NCV 177). The two most complex subjects to be explained to the Westerner, Nivedita knew, were woman and caste. Almost in all the places where she was invited to speak, whether in America or in England, Nivedita found that the question of caste, along with the status of women, invariably came up for discussion. Though
all the lectures she delivered in the West are not available, there is one definite record of her views in this matter: it is the chapter in *The Web of Indian Life* entitled "Noblesse Oblige: A Study of Indian Caste." Here Nivedita throws light upon the much misunderstood institution of caste with the acumen and erudition of a gifted anthropologist (NCV 174).

Nivedita understands very well that "caste, in missionary eyes, is an unmitigated abuse. They confine themselves to an account of its negations and prohibitions, ignoring all its elements of the trades-guild and race-protection type" (CW 4: 521). And to Nivedita what is more infuriating is the fact that the Europeans say all this while every moment of their lives in India has been a ratification of that new caste of race-prestige which is one of the most striking phenomena of an imperialistic age. Hence Nivedita's brilliant vindication of the institution of caste.

The word caste has been believed by the Westerners to be untranslatable; however, this supposed untranslatability of the word has served only to make it mysterious, rendering it more difficult to accept. In a mood that would curiously remind one today of Edward Said, Nivedita points out how this has worsened the situation, making it obligatory on every reformer to enter into a conflict with it, rendering the whole question obscure and irritating. Determined to put an end to this artificial obscurity, Nivedita is happy to find an exact equivalent for it in English: it is the word 'honour.' Both 'caste' and 'honour', according to Nivedita, connote "the same debatable borderland between morals and good taste" (CW 2: 104). Nivedita finds that, in spite of the rigidity that has accumulated around the system over the centuries, India has made an acute and profound analysis of the subject.

Average human conduct is governed more by a fear of "the power of ostracism" of the society of which one is a member than by a consideration of right
and wrong. It is this fact that has given caste its formidable power all over the world. Deflating the Western myth, often believed by Indians with Western education, that the West is free from the undesirable social phenomenon of the caste system, Nivedita writes, “it is as true of London as of Benares that caste-law is the last and finest that controls a man”. Caste raises social obligations, the fulfillment of which confers no special merit but the failure to do which will be a stain upon one’s conscience. Yet the observance of caste-laws bestows no moral merit nor is it one’s duty to God; hence Nivedita points out how, in India, “the complete renunciation of [the] claims and benefits [of caste] is essential to the monastic life” (CW 2: 105). Nivedita points out that the true failure of caste occurs whenever it establishes “an ascendancy of social opinion over the individual’s conscience” (CW 2: 106).

After thus dispelling the Western misconceptions regarding caste and establishing that it is no different from the English sense of honour, Nivedita attempts a historical survey of the evolution of the social system in India.

Nivedita seeks the origin of the system in the Aryan forefathers’ anxiety “for the preservation of the ancient race-treasure of Sanskrit literature”. It is this anxiety that Nivedita sees at the bottom of the customs of the land, “of prostration at the feet of the Brahmins, of the great merit acquired by feeding them, and of the terror of the crime of killing one” (CW 2: 107). Honouring the Brahmins is race preservation while harming them is endangering the race culture. Ultimately what is honoured is not the Brahmin but the race itself. This entrusting of the preservation of the Vedic literature with the Brahmin caste must have been extended to other secular writings like psychology, mathematics and astronomy later, and in course of time the Brahmin caste came to be the natural guardians of all learning.
Caste is thus “an occupational group giving birth immediately to the ideal necessary to its safety” (CW 2: 108). The strong feeling of class obligations is evident in the Indian society, Nivedita feels, not only among the Brahmins but also in the Indian industrial castes, “which are often hereditary trade unions” (CW 2: 109). The right of one occupational group to its occupation uncontested by others is so scrupulously followed in India that people of one caste can never be induced to take up the occupation of another. Though this is done in the name of caste, it is actually allocation of duty, and thereby, of social status and security. Swami Vivekananda observes: “it is owing to caste that three hundred millions of people can find a piece of bread to eat yet” (CW-SV 5: 307).

In an objective and honest attempt at intellectual enquiry, Nivedita recognizes that “the strongest, and perhaps also ugliest, of all possible roots of caste is the sense of race, the caste of blood”. Examples are not wanting in the West of castes of blood, points out Nivedita. There is an instance of this in the animosity that divides white men from Negroes in the US, and, Nivedita continues, “we have other instances, less talked of, all up and down our vast British possessions” (CW 2: 109). Nivedita condemns this as an inhuman emotion that nevertheless enjoys universal sympathy.

From a study of the caste system as it existed in Bengal during her days, Nivedita tries to deduce the elements of the problem as it would have appeared to the Aryan forefathers. The first element of the problem, Nivedita identifies to be the ban against inter-marriage or intercaste marriage, as it is known in India today. Nivedita writes that if a daughter were given in marriage beneath the caste, the whole family would become outcaste (CW 2: 109). Of course oucasting a family on this score is not so severely followed nowadays even though intercaste marriages are becoming more common in India.
Another evil of the system is untouchability, though it was not known by this name in her days. Nivedita understands this too to be a direct result of the original apprehension of the Aryans for safeguarding their system of manners in its original purity. Thus the lower castes were restricted from touching the food or water of their betters. Nivedita observes that this “don’t touchism”, as Swami Vivekananda wittily named it, had become a great social abuse, becoming “an instrument of petty persecution”. It is true that India, which escaped the evil of religious persecution common in the West in the Middle Ages, failed to avoid social persecution that resulted from caste. In full sympathy with the persecuted, Nivedita observes: “some of the saddest instances of caste failure have occurred here” (CW 2: 111).

But there are two other elements of the problem of caste superiority, which Nivedita feels the Aryan forefathers have solved with the least injury to all concerned. One is assigning a definite place to the lower order of people in the scale of labour, which, however low it might be, gave them a position in society. This is contempt with some redeeming humanity about it, feels Nivedita, because this at once preserved the aboriginal races from extinction and at the same time prevented slavery (CW 2: 110). Compared to the European atrocity of wiping out from the face of the earth whole tribes of people, this is certainly social consideration as far as it could go. Where the people were too numerous to be exterminated, the Europeans made them ‘useful’ by slavery, as it happened in the case of Negroes. And it is undeniable that both the cruelties were avoided in the Aryan context.

The fourth element of the problem for the Aryans Nivedita holds to be the existence of customs, practices and social gradations among the aborigines themselves, which were markedly different from those of the Aryans. And Nivedita points out how, in their perception of this fact, “the early Aryans triumphantly solved the riddle of humanity”. That solution lay in the Aryans’ perception of the
need for, and practice of, allowing autonomy to the aborigines. “Marriage, for instance, is an elaborate and expensive social function in the highest classes [in India]. But as we descend, it becomes easier, till, amongst... the aboriginal castes, almost any connection is ratified by the recognition of women and children”. Nivedita points out how “this is a point in which Eastern scores over Western development; for in Europe the Church has caused to be reckoned as immoral what might, with more philosophy, have been treated as the lingering customs of sub-organised race-strata” (CW 2: 111). It is this autonomy of the castes which is the real essential for social flexibility and fundamental equality” (CW 2: 112).

Perceptive as this analysis of the caste system by Nivedita is, it cannot be missed that throughout this analysis Nivedita assumes the Aryan invasion theory to be true. It leaves one wondering how someone generally as keen-sighted as Nivedita could be mistaken in this matter. However, as she bases her arguments as much on her direct observation as on the assumption about the Aryan invasion theory, these arguments are not discredited.

To come back to Nivedita, she argues that, contrary to all the prevailing misconception, in India the Brahmin does not hold any monopoly in religion. “No possible statement could be more foreign to the genius of Hinduism. Spirituality has always been regarded in India as the common human possession”, observes Nivedita. In support of this argument Nivedita cites the Hindu word for religion itself – it is “Dharma, or the man-ness of man.” Realising the full significance of this term, Nivedita points out “the whole weight of the conception [of religion] is shifted away from creed, much more from caste or race, to that which is universal and permanent in each and every human being” (CW 2: 113). And lastly, Nivedita reminds us that the greatest historical teachers of Hinduism – Rama and Krishna – were not Brahmins (CW 2: 113-14).
The Brahmin was not the privileged monopolist of religion but was the common channel of religious lore. Realisation or spiritual experience is recognised as far superior to caste. In proof of this fact, Nivedita refers to the custom of family chaplain or kula guru in Bengal, who may be the official teacher, “but every man and woman discards his authority silently the instant they find some soul...with a quickening spiritual touch upon their own.” Such a man of realization, irrespective of his birth, “becomes the Guru ... and this relationship is made the central fact of life” (CW 2: 115). If he is sufficiently great to be a social phenomenon, the distinctions of caste break down amongst his disciples and followers, whose social status is raised by the stamp of his character and prestige (CW 2: 116).

Commenting on castes and religious conversion, Nivedita writes that every wave of reform in India, though it called itself a movement towards caste abolition, ended simply in the formation of another group. Nivedita boldly affirms that reform is an opportunity as well as a limiting factor. It is an opportunity when the agitator aims not at a reformation of the external caste factors but looks to the quickening of the “underlying spiritual impulses” in all men. Ramanuja, Guru Nanak, Chaitanya may all be considered as such saintly reformers who raised the social as well as spiritual status of their followers. It will be a limiting factor only when the leader is not able to appeal to the spiritual element in man (CW 2: 117).

Contrary to all popular opinion, Nivedita asserts that caste is no barrier to cooperation, that it is not essentially divisive. Defining what is essential to cooperation among groups of varied description, she observe beautifully that cooperation is “an established habit of ignoring all points of mutual difference not germane to the matter in hand”. From this point of view it is not difficult for the Sister to see that this habit of co-operation is rather ingrained in the Indians by the observance of caste restrictions, where the autonomy of each caste is respected by
all. “If Indian men and women are not at present capable of combined action to any
great degree, it is a matter of their own neglect of the habit, and not a necessary
consequence of their institutions” (CW 2: 117).

It remains for us to see what the great advantages of the caste system are
according to the Sister, from which the West, as much as the East, can benefit. She
points out as the first great advantage the benefits that may accrue to the poorer
members in the caste, from the patronage of those who have advanced in life and
owed that advance to their communities (CW 2: 118). This practice of a person
advanced in wealth and education sharing those good fortunes with his brethren in
his community is something remarkable in the eyes of Nivedita and draws full praise
from her. “This is the exact opposite of the European device, where the upper class
absorbs money, talent, and beauty from the lower, while that [lower class] is
continually recruited by the failures from above” (CW 2: 118-19).

As the next great advantage that may accrue to the society from caste in
Nivedita’s eyes is the fact that caste is “an institution that makes the Hindu society
the most eclectic with regard to ideas in the world” (CW 2: 119). To those into
whose heads it has been hammered that caste has bred only innumerable and
inhuman evils, both in the East and the West, it is refreshing to hear from Nivedita
how in India that very system of caste has contributed to its welcoming and
acceptance of people of other religions. The learned Sister shows how in India all
religions have taken refuge - the Zoroastrian, the Jewish, the Mohammedan and the
Christian. “And they have received more than shelter – they have had the hospitality
of a world that had nothing to fear from the foreigner who came in the name of
freedom of conscience”. Nivedita elaborates beautifully how caste made this
possible; she deduces three factors in the caste system that contribute to this
elasticity: 1. caste is “the social formulation of defence minus all elements of
aggression”. That is to say, by strict adherence to the rules of one’s own caste, one is able to preserve one’s caste at the same time as preventing others from encroaching upon it. But with the weakening of the system in various ways, along with the disappearance of many of its rigidities, one is afraid that much of this strength has also gone. Now shorn of its strength, the system seems to be defenceless in the absence of the elements of aggression. 2. Nivedita talks of the moral strength involved in the “deep undying faith in destiny in the Hindu heart” (CW 2: 119), which enables him to guard the treasure of his birth for an unbroken posterity. Following the Sister’s logic, one is able to understand how every Hindu of earlier generations realised the sacred charge of passing on to posterity that which his forefathers were great enough to pass on to him. As a result of this realization, he preserved the age-old customs by following them and, through his example, inspired his immediate next generation to do likewise, thus safely handing them down to posterity and leaving the world with the supreme satisfaction that he had fulfilled his destiny. One is reminded by contrast of the European’s belief in his destiny, which is to ‘civilize’ peoples whose customs and ways of life he does not understand! This goes far to prove that there is no aggression in the Hindu. But what is to be deplored today is that it is doubtful if the moral strength that spoke in the refusal of a doorkeeper of a viceroy’s palace to share a cup of water with the ruler of all India could now be found as a common characteristic of all Indians. If Nivedita were to come again to India it would trouble her not a little to think that the Indian people are losing hold of their grip on what is precious in their civilization; they neither know the worth of the treasure they are losing, nor are they aware of the various forces that are acting towards this loss.

The third strength of caste according to Nivedita is the fact that “caste is race continuity; it is the historic sense; it is the dignity of tradition and of purpose for the future.... It is the familiarity of a whole people in all its grades with the one supreme
human motive – the notion of ‘noblesse oblige.’” In other words, caste teaches its adherents all the various shades of nobility and honour. Having adduced all reasons for the advantage of caste, Nivedita asks “is caste, then, simply a burden, to be thrown off lightly, as a thing irksome and of little moment?” (CW 2: 120) One will feel like saying with her, no, if caste and the country that instituted that social organization are understood in the manner delineated above by the perceptive Sister. Swami Vivekananda says, “if caste is unavoidable, I would rather have a caste of purity and culture and self-sacrifice, than a caste of dollars” (CW-SV 3: 199).

But Nivedita is not carried away by the advantages of the social institution of caste. She sternly reminds Indians that if India is ever to regain national efficiency, this old device of the forefathers must be modified in the process. And Nivedita lays the responsibility of finding out how to do it in the hands of the Indians themselves.

As Swami Vivekananda remarked with accurate foresight, western education has already accomplished much in the direction of the levelling of the castes, and, in the process, cleansed the land not only of some of the evil effects of caste but of many of the welcome ones as well. Nivedita’s interpretation of caste is great as both defence and revelation: defence, when the audience or reader is Western; and revelation for Indians who have learnt to blindly believe that caste is an evil. While the brilliance of this analysis of caste by Sr. Nivedita is undeniable, it should be remembered that it can profoundly disturb the established opinion of many in the West and the East and thus provoke opposition. For the effect of Nivedita’s exposition of the Indian caste system is to show that caste is relevant in ways which neither many Indians nor Westerners of today can penetrate. It tries to demonstrate that castes are not social divisions, as is generally believed, but that they form an indispensable part of Indian civilization. It is essential to realize that her appreciation of the caste system is not unqualified. If Sr. Nivedita speaks in support of caste it is
not that she is against the spirit of the Indian constitution, which, about forty three years after her, tries to do justice to one section of the pluralistic society of India, bearing in mind mainly the centuries old evil effects of the system. That section is of course the much maligned section of the society. But even this does not prove Nivedita to be wrong. It only proves that she had a holistic view of the system: she perceived that caste has been the pillar of Indian social organization that sustained the Indian society all these centuries. She believed that caste can still be suitably modified to do justice to all section of society and thus strengthen the Indian culture in view of the modern developments. She forcefully reminds Indians that it is their duty to demonstrate the strength of their vision and vigour for action by avoiding former evils like untouchability while not failing to benefit from the proven strengths of the system. For, it is these strengths of caste that make it one of the comparatively less objectionable and more praiseworthy social systems of the world.

In her all-out effort to clear misconceptions about India in the West Nivedita did not leave out the children either, because as one born in England, her own childhood had been embittered by false representations about India, which at that stage one could not but believe to be true. Hence when the first opportunity to give a public speech in an American city offered itself, she accepted it gladly: it was an elementary school in which she was asked to speak and as befitting the audience she chose to speak on “the Christ-Child – and then on to [sic] the Indian Christ-Child, Dhruva, Prahalada, Gopala.”(Lr. to Ms Josephine MacLeod, dated 16 Nov.1899) (Letters 1: 239). She was also to speak to the children of the higher classes: “And to the big ones I want to give a geography lesson, a little American patriotism for a start – and then on to India – the Ganges – Agra – the Taj, and the Fort” (Letters 1: 239). In India itself the children partook of the national treasures of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas in three different ways, as Nivedita points out in the Preface to The Cradle Tales of Hinduism: the stories were poured into the
willing ears of the children by their loving and wise grandmothers; there were the village dramas and finally the recitals of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata by the traditional village story-teller. As these opportunities are naturally unavailable to the Western children, Nivedita chose to tell the stories for them. And she proves to be a very interesting story-teller indeed. In fact, there are some who prefer these well-told stories to the Web of Indian Life meant for mature ears. The book was published in both America and England in 1907. While in India, Nivedita had made a regular study of this literature by going to the libraries and consulting Swami Vivekananda and Jogin Ma on this subject. About her experience of writing these stories, Nivedita wrote in a letter to Mrs. Frances Legget: “I never did anything so difficult as these stories. Fancy! Today I have before me the task of putting on paper what I know about Buddha! It is like trying to put the rainbow under a tumbler. I have done only five stories so far, of which only one, the Prithvi Rai, satisfies Mr. Waterman” (Letters 1: 333).

In these Tales, Nivedita tries to create the wonderland of India in contrast to the horrible image created by the missionaries and travellers. She misses no opportunity to tell the Western children about the various aspects of life in India. For example, the beautiful natural scenery of India figures in the description of the beauty of Himalayan forests and the snows in “The Tale of Uma Haimavati” (CW 3:168); the nobility of character of Indians, especially the women, is seen in the account of the loyal wife given in “Savitri, The Indian Alcestis” (CW 3:174); the meaning and beauty of Indian customs are set forth in the same story (CW 3:177) in the description of an Indian pilgrimage given there prefaced by the various benefits that could be drawn from it from the point of view of different people; the gentle cow and its place in the Indian household, how Indian girls are taught to rear it well, and the hour of cowdust, when the cattle return from grazing are described vividly in
“The Judgement Seat of Vikramaditya” (CW 3:320-1). Examples could be multiplied.

Throughout these stories it is obvious that Nivedita is anxious to make the Western children love India. Difficult ideas are explained without seeming to be giving a lesson, as in the explanation of the Ten Avatars of Mahavishnu in “The Story of Prahalada” (CW 3:298) or that of the Indian Era of Vikramaditya in “The Judgement Seat of Vikramaditya” (CW 3:319). Portents and omens are narrated to convey the impending doom on the Vrishni clan in “The Doom of the Vrishnis” (CW 3:289). That the real name of the country now commonly known as India is Bhāratavarsha is told in the appropriate manner in the opening words of “Bharata”; in the same story we find a beautiful explanation of the social institution of Vānaprastha (CW 3:314).

In short, a Western child who reads these stories cannot fail to understand India as a land of human beings quite like them in many respects and different yet understandably so in many others. The Dedication of this interesting work\(^\text{15}\) shows how much Nivedita believed in the power of the Indian epics and the other stories to fascinate and influence the minds of the children who read them - non-Indian as well as Indian.

In the nineteenth century India, ruled by an imperial mother country, the political and social scene presented a situation where not only did the so-called ‘mother-country’ throw upon the native society harsh and unthinking criticism that sprang from gross misunderstanding of the customs, beliefs and principles of the subject race, but presented its arguments in such an attractive, seemingly scholarly and objective form\(^\text{16}\) that many a native thinker took the spurious arguments to be unbiased truth. When this was coupled with an unsympathetic observation of some
adverse social conditions, the result was the reformist spirit that worked with great energy towards the removal of what it thought to be the social evils that plagued the Indian society. The Reformist movement that swept the nineteenth century India had several phases with far-reaching consequences for the Indian civilisation.

The social reformers, fresh from their contact with the West, conceived a special regard for Western social institutions. They believed that Hinduism was plagued by superstitions from which, to their thinking, Christianity was remarkably free. The orthodox were treading in their round of customs and showed no capacity to assess the new challenges that were being posed by the powerful alien civilisation, while “the reformers, on account of their zeal for everything ... English, were unwittingly stifling the soul of the nation”. But the situation was not entirely hopeless. In reaction to this blind attitude of the reformers and the equally ignorant inability of the orthodox, there arose in India, thinkers who set out to awaken the Indians to the real glory of their past and inspire them towards the task of preserving the soul of the nation. “But in order to preserve the soul of a nation, one must first discover it. And before discovering the soul of the nation, one must discover one’s own soul. It was this task of spiritual and cultural self-discovery that was achieved by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement” (S.K. Kshirsagar NCV 167).

As one of the earliest thinkers and representatives of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement (Nivedita always referred to herself as “Nivedita of the Ramakrishna Order” and as “Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda”), Nivedita vigorously defended the religious beliefs and practices of Hinduism against the attacks of Reformist groups like the Brahmo Samaj. The Samaj was a popular movement in Bengal in the nineteenth century and the early decades of twentieth, whose members possessed the spirit of the Christian missionaries in attacking what they considered to be the meaningless orthodoxy of the Hindus in their social and
religious customs. The circumstances under which Nivedita met the charges of the Brahmos in Calcutta were sometimes curious. S.K. Ratcliffe, the then editor of "The Statesman," describes the circumstances in which he met Sr. Nivedita: He was a newcomer to India, having joined the staff of "The Statesman" only a few weeks before. A European lady had invited some English ladies and gentlemen and a few Indians, mostly members of the Brahma Samaj to meet Nivedita. S.K. Ratcliffe was one of those invited and he describes the meeting as follows: "The whole affair was strange – the afternoon gathering, the meeting of West and East, and this Western voice speaking to Europeanised Indians of the greatness and enduring beauty of the customs and ideals from which they had cut themselves adrift" (Atmaprana 258). This could be said to be the general atmosphere in which Nivedita defended India's glory to Indians themselves.

One of the charges levelled by these Westernised Hindus against orthodox Hinduism was that it was guilty of idolatry. Nivedita answers this charge with full understanding of the Hindu custom. While explaining the significance of the image of Kali in "Kali and her Worship," she points out the universal practice of all religions in the use of word-pictures or descriptions of the Divine in various forms and connects this to the practice of idolatry followed by a few religions. She observes: "in addition to word-pictures, which all worshippers use, the Hindu Rishis thought it wise to have concrete material images to help the understanding, and hence is the system of image-worship among them" (CW 2: 429).

A subtle blow is dealt on the critics of idolatry when Nivedita points out above that they also use a sort of idol in the form of word-pictures. "Concrete material images" are only a further help to the human mind to concentrate itself on the Unknown and Unknowable. Dorothy L. Sayers writes in "The Mind of the Maker":
The Jews, keenly alive to the perils of pictorial metaphor, forbade the representation of the person of God in graven images. Nevertheless, human nature and the nature of human language defeated them. No legislation could prevent the making of verbal pictures. To forbid the making of pictures about God would be to forbid thinking about God at all, for man is so made that he has no way to think except in pictures. But continually, through out the history of the Jewish-Christian Church, the voice of warning has been raised against the power of picture-makers” (Pelikan 187-8).

In Kali the Mother Nivedita recognizes the need of the human intellect to see the Eternal Light through a mask imposed by our own thought (CW 1: 462), which, though only a mask, cannot be dispensed with. But that mask cannot be the same for all. It has to be different for different temperaments. Man being human, “the highest representation of the Divine is always human”. Where it is not human, as in the symbols of Light, the Door, the Mountain and the Shield, these cannot “take captive both brain and heart”. Very different will be the effect of “those other pictures, the Good Shepherd, the Eternal Father!” (CW 1: 468) She points out how the Western mind is apt to confuse the ‘formula’ (that is, the convention of thinking of God as the Good Shepherd or the Eternal Father) with the truth and forget that even this is not final, that beyond the expression, and apart form it, lies the whole immensity. Nivedita contends that the Hindus have escaped the Schilla of the fear of resorting to a symbol and the Charibdys of the danger of taking the symbol for the entire truth. And this they have achieved through the very custom for which the Westerners blamed them as being idolatrous. “Hinduism has avoided this danger of fixedness in a very curious way. Of all the peoples of the earth, it might be claimed that Hindus are apparently the most, and at heart the least, idolatrous. For the application of their symbols is many-centred, like the fire in opals” (CW 1: 468). As was mentioned earlier in Chapter Two in a different context, Nivedita, while describing the Durga
Puja in *The Web of Indian Life*, points out how the image is “conveyed away and thrown bodily into the river!” at the end of the Puja. She remarks aptly that this custom of disposing of the image is a proof of the Hindu mind’s way of doing away with the possibility of “the image ... thwart[ing] its own intention and becom[ing] an idol.” (CW 2: 11)

As to mythology, Nivedita asserts with the certainty of truth and with full identification with that which she understood to be true, that though Hinduism has recourse to a vast lore of mythology, it is not dependent on it for its final proof. “We are not really so seriously incommoded by our mythology as those are who call us idolatrous by theirs” (CW 3: 387). Foreigners do not generally understand this freedom from intellectual bondage to mythology, because, as Nivedita rightly claims, they cannot distinguish between mythology and absolute truth. Nivedita observes aptly:

> In spite of its seemingly vast mythology, the actual content of Hinduism is infinitely less dependent on mythological ideas than any other religion whatsoever, not excepting Christianity.... Perhaps the real crown of Hinduism lies in the fact that it, almost alone amongst formulated faiths, has a section devoted to absolute and universal truths, and has no fear whatever of discriminating between these and those accidental expressions which might be confounded by the superficial with their belief itself. (CW 3: 386).

Explaining the difference between mythology and that portion of Hinduism which deals with absolute truths, Nivedita writes that there are two classes of Scripture, one Vedas, the other Puranas. Vedas are eternal truth. 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.
Nivedita demonstrates the distinction between Veda and Purana through an illustration from Christianity itself: “when the Christian Gospel says, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul,’ it speaks Veda; but when it says ‘Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king’ it is only a Purana, and may contain some elements of untruth” (CW 2: 136).

Thus, while Hindu mythology may not be acceptable to others, Nivedita points out how “the most distinctive and important of [Hindu] religious ideas … are indeed as applicable to the West as to the East” (CW 3: 386).

Another serious charge made by the reformers was that Kali worship was hideous and hateful. To answer these charges Nivedita gave talks on Kali worship on several occasions in Calcutta and published a book on the subject Kali the Mother, which became popular in India and abroad. The reformist attack on Kali worship was on several grounds and Nivedita answered them all.

Nivedita interpreted the Kali image as a symbol of a certain truth and dealt a severe blow to those who objected to it, taking it in its literalness. Swami Chidbhavananda, a respected sanyasin of the Ramakrishna movement in Tamil Nadu and well-known author of a commentary on the Bhagavadgita and other important Hindu scriptures, writes in his book Facets of Brahman – The Hindu Gods:

These figures [of Kali and Durga] are not biological facts, but they are allegorical concepts. One should not complain that there is neither beauty nor symmetry in the map of a country. Such is also the purpose of a symbol or an allegory. Attention is to be paid on the revealed truth and not on the queer aid to the revelation (38).

Arguing in a similar vein, Nivedita writes: “Not one feature of Kali will be found overdrawn or exaggerated if she is looked upon as the concretized image of the fundamental law of relative life” (CW 2: 430). For God is not only the God of
Love and peace but also the God of Terror. It is this basic truth about life that the symbolism of Kali represents, which is not understood by many.

The most prominent feature about Kali is her horridness. She is naked and dances on the bosom of her husband. She has a garland of decapitated heads round her neck and her tongue is outstretched to drink the warm blood of her victims. Weapons and terrible agents of Death adorn and surround Her. She is all terror. This, Nivedita explains, is the struggle for existence, whether we like it or not. In a remarkable exposition of the Kali image she writes:

Maya...shows herself in innumerable, terrible, unwomanly, unmotherly ways. In place of the one limitless, taintless, surging ocean of bliss, we have this infinitely variegated relative world of phenomena, and the one cry of misery and death, the inevitable product of the struggle for existence which dominates and shapes it, ringing through every plane of existence. (CW 2: 430)

The dominant, active and restless nature of the phenomenal existence and the truth of the noumenon or the Brahman behind it, as well as the intention of the rishis who had the original vision of Kali is conveyed with all its force when Nivedita says that Kali drags Brahman and puts him aside and rivets all attention to herself. Always engaging our attention, this phenomenal existence hides the truth of the Reality behind. The Hindu philosophical theory of the apparent and the real, Kali and Brahman, is thus accurately symbolized by the Kali image and Nivedita correlates the two accurately. She concludes her explanation of this truth with the following words about the significance of the image: “Maya is false; Kali is its symbol.... To convey her unreality – as she shows herself, she is painted as the ideal non-woman”. And to Her devotee She teaches the lesson that “She has to be seen through, she has to be crossed over”. And when one sees through Maya, the seer tells Kali that he has recognized the truth about her: “she is not what she seems, she
is really Brahman and in no other light would he see her. She is Tara (the way to Moksha) and Brahmamayi (pervaded, interpenetrated, overlapped and full of Brahman)” (CW 2: 431). From an apt description of the symbolism of Kali, the Mother of Terror, Nivedita imperceptibly moves on, in the above passage, to the Sakta philosophy of Bengal, which finally identifies Kali with Brahman.

Nivedita replies to the question of the critics as to how one can bring oneself to worship such a hideous figure as Kali’s with a counter-question: “What else should be thought of or worshipped – if not she? Does one pore over a blank sheet, if one has to commit to memory a book?” (CW 2: 431) That is to say, the image of Kali invites one to see the malevolent as well as the benevolent aspects of the phenomenal existence and then go beyond both. To represent this there is no other image as apt as that of Kali.

To the charge of hideousness in the image of Kali, Nivedita answers that to the eye of devotion it is not hideous at all; she also points out how the early Byzantine paintings and carvings would seem ‘lifeless and ugly’ to one who is not initiated into the beauty and the principles of the Byzantine art (CW 2: 435).

As to the criticism that the worship of Kali has led to animal sacrifice, Nivedita answers that one would offer to God what one enjoys in life; and, like the mathematical operations learnt early in childhood, this kind of worship will be engaged in during the undeveloped stage of man. Worship has to answer all types of human nature. However, Nivedita points out the ultimate significance of sacrifice: “What we live by, that we must give. Yet it was not the sacrifice of others but of ourselves that was the ultimate offering laid down in the Kali-ritual” (CW 2: 437). Renunciation and self-sacrifice, and not killing of innocent animals, is the type of worship into which Kali worship should evolve.
As to the charge of debauchery and corrupt practices, Nivedita answers that the argument that a noble and true religious idea was to be held accountable for the vagaries of its followers was in itself ridiculous. “What religion had burnt most human beings” asks Nivedita “in the name of its Master? Christianity: did any one dream of holding Jesus responsible for this? Would they be right if they did? Certainly not. …Nor in the same way could we denounce Indian religion as the cause of Indian crime” (CW 2: 437). Nivedita says, by way of concluding her argument, that she is not unaware “of the many beastly and corrupt rites which have come to be associated with Kali-worship. While our regret for them is boundless we do not see the wisdom of inveighing against Kali-worship in the wholesale manner as is often done by some sisters and brothers. Destroy the weeds, but save the garden!” (CW 2: 433)

Nivedita’s defence of the controversial topic of Kali worship was welcomed enthusiastically by the devotees of Kali and vehemently opposed by its critics. But it stimulated everyone to think.

While the vindication of Kali worship given above is the one usually given by the intelligent among the orthodox, Nivedita once had a flash of inspiration, in which she hit upon an interpretation all her own. Nivedita felt that Kali is the vision of Shiva: She was what his third eye saw. She elaborates this idea in the section called “Concerning Symbols” in her book Kali the Mother. Here, rather than the names Shiva and Kali, which are traditionally associated with deities, the simple reference of soul and nature, purusha and prakriti is employed. The soul is the purusha and nature is prakriti. Building on this basic philosophical tenet of Hinduism, Nivedita says, “The soul lies inert, passive, unstirred by the external, till the great moment of illumination comes, when it looks up at the shock of some divine catastrophe, to know in a flash that the whole of the without - the whole of
life, and time and nature, and experience - like the within, is also god.” Nivedita clinches the argument in these beautiful words: “of such a moment is the Kali image a symbol – the soul opening its eyes upon the world and seeing god” (CW 1: 469). The moment of grace that brings the spiritual experience need not always be something pleasant. For, “Kali has been executing a wild dance of carnage. ... Suddenly she has stepped unwittingly on the body of her husband.... He has looked up, awakened by that touch, and ...deep into the heart of that most terrible, he looks unshrinking, and in the ecstasy of recognition he calls her mother”(CW 1: 471-2). The ecstatic recognition is the illumination that everything, including the terrible and the pleasant, the appearance as well as that which is beyond, is God. Looked at from this angle, the Kali-image is not so much a picture of the deity, as the utterance of the secret of our own lives (CW 1: 472).

All devotees of Kali, like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, her guru Swami Vivekananda, her contemporary Sri Aurobindo and her disciple, the Tamil poet Subrahmanya Bharathi, have felt Kali’s irresistible power and found strength and solace in Her and Nivedita was no exception. For, with Nivedita, it was not just an intellectual appreciation of a wonderful symbol. It was a living faith. Barbara Foxe makes a perceptive remark when she writes about the significance of Kali to Nivedita:

Perhaps there was something stormy in her own nature which responded to the symbolism of Kali; she had no fear of the terrible, and she had seen enough suffering; while the finest side of her own nature was a gentle and motherly one. The two sides of her nature often clashed, and in Kali-worship the clash may have been echoed, and resolved for her. ... This symbolism of Kali grew more and more strongly into her thinking and meditation as her life proceeded; ... Kali who was worshipped with total love by the gentle and compassionate Sri Ramakrishna, whose own nature was, Vivekananda told her, "as hard as adamant!” (84 – 85).
To sum up, what led Sr. Nivedita to a passionate defence of India in the first instance was an intense realization of India’s greatness, the Westerners’ meanness in belittling it and the Indians’ inability to sufficiently and effectively defend themselves. For to Sr. Nivedita the greatness of India was living and true. It was obvious to her that only ignorance, jealousy and malice could be at the back of any inveighing against the men and manners of India. Whether it was the scholar or the missionary or the ordinary traveller, all Europeans began with a preconception about the superiority of their own culture and the barbarity of the heathen that they were simply incapacitated to see the beauty and truth behind the Indian way of life. And the subaltern could not speak.

Hence Nivedita had decided to be the voice of the voiceless. When she did speak, with her passion for truth, for right and powerful utterance of the truth, with a burning love for Indians and an equally strong desire to apologise for the wrongs of her country- men and women, it is no wonder that that defence was forceful and set things in their true light. However if discovery had led to defence, Nivedita now realized that the next move was to be a redefinition of India in order to inspire Indians.

Not that Nivedita thought she could completely give up coming out in support of India. As long as Britain ruled in India, that was not to be. But the emphasis was being shifted, in her thinking, from defence to rousing Indians to self-defence and self-government. Towards that main purpose Sr. Nivedita set her heart and soul and plunged into work in India and for India. The next chapter will give an account of what she did for India as revealed in her works.