



Address by the Hon'ble President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind on the Occasion of 150th Birth Anniversary Celebrations of Sister Nivedita

Posted On: 28 OCT 2017 7:24AM by PIB Guwahati

1. I am very happy to be here for the commemoration of the 150th birth anniversary of Sister Nivedita. This is my first visit to the Ramakrishna Mission since taking over as President of India, but the Mission and its work are very familiar to me. I have visited this place several times before. In my individual capacity, I have been drawn to the teachings of Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda. They have inspired me to visit the Dakshineswar Temple and Belur Math near Kolkata. As such, in many respects today I am among friends.
2. Swami Vivekananda was one of those who shaped our modern national consciousness. He rediscovered Indian values not only for us but for the world. He was a true cultural ambassador, as became so apparent during his visit to Chicago in 1893 for the Parliament of Religions.
3. Swami Vivekananda was more than just a monk and a spiritual leader. He was an institution builder and a nation builder. A few days ago, I was fortunate to visit and interact with scientists at the Indian Institute of Science (or IISc) in Bengaluru. I learnt that the origins of IISc lay in a conversation that Swami Vivekananda and Jamshetji Tata had had while travelling on the same ship to the United States.
4. Swamiji was going for the Parliament of Religions. Jamshetji Tata was going in search of a technologist who could help him build a steel plant in India and so fulfil his dream of setting up a major industrial facility in our country. Both men were travelling with a vision of a new and better India. They got to know each other on the ship. During their conversations, Swamiji urged Jamshetji to set up a world-class scientific research institution in India. Even while travelling to America for an important conference, his mind was on our country and its needs – and its future.
5. Swami Vivekananda combined spiritualism and scholarship, idealism and practical thinking. His legacy is reflected in the Ramakrishna Mission, which is itself 120 years old and has grown from strength to strength. It has not been dependent on any one individual but has established an institutional rigour and a culture of enlightenment and integrity. This has allowed it to undertake social and public welfare programmes in very difficult conditions and locations.
6. The Mission's education and health-care initiatives, its schools and hospitals, can be found all over the country. What is laudable is that the monks and volunteers of the Ramakrishna Mission have gone to the very homes of the most marginalised communities.
7. In parts of the Northeast and in our frontier state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Ramakrishna Mission has been a pioneer institution. In Maoist-troubled Chhattisgarh, I have seen the dedication with which the Ramakrishna Mission has worked among very poor and underprivileged tribal communities in Narayanpur. This is a remarkable and genuine example of public service – of seva in the true sense of the word.
8. I sometimes feel a visit to Narayanpur and an experience of the work that the Ramakrishna Mission does there should be part of the training of our young civil servants. They will witness nation building in action.

Friends

9. The external achievements of the Ramakrishna Mission are only a reflection of its inner calling and the wisdom of its spiritual mentors. Sadhus and monks at the Ramakrishna Mission may have relinquished the world's pleasures and treasures, but they have not relinquished knowledge and enlightenment.
10. They are learned people and make a constant effort to keep learning. It is not uncommon to find highly educated swamis and sadhus in the Ramakrishna Mission, including some with doctorates and PhDs. They equate spiritualism with a higher knowledge and set an example for the rest of us. Their honesty in the management of institutions too is absolutely beyond reproach.
11. It was such attributes that drew Sister Nivedita to Swami Vivekananda and led to her accepting him as her guru. She was born in Ireland and came to India at a time when both our countries were under colonial rule. They were trying to regain not just political freedom but cultural freedom too.
12. There were many interactions between Irish and Indian political leaders in that period – but the bond that connected Swamiji and Sister Nivedita was unique. They wrote letters to each other that showed their commitment to certain values, as well as to a dignified friendship between a guru and a disciple.
13. Two excerpts from Swami Vivekananda's letters to Sister Nivedita, written in Sanskrit, are worth quoting. They give us a glimpse to his thinking and his philosophy – and to the ethos of the Ramakrishna Mission.
14. In the first letter Swamiji tells Sister Nivedita that his life's mantra is: वज्रादपि कठोरानि मृदूनि कुसुमादपि

This translates to “Tougher than rocks; more tender than flowers”. It points to Swamiji’s ability to balance the idealism of his work with the practical aspects of everyday life.

15. In the second letter, Swamiji impresses upon Sister Nivedita that: नहि कल्याण कृत्कश्चित् दुर्गतिं तात गच्छति

Or: “A person who does good to others, never meets a bad end ...”

16. Actually, both these quotations from Swamiji define what has remained the Ramakrishna Mission’s essential approach to this very day.

Friends

17. Sister Nivedita’s original name was Margaret Noble. True to her name, she served India with nobility. She was a pioneer in girls’ education in India and in providing health services to the poor. She was a westerner who embraced India wholeheartedly, and lived and died with the well-being of India and Indians on her mind and in her heart.

18. Indian culture and spiritualism have attracted people from other countries for centuries. Taxila’s famous university, where among others Kautilya is believed to have taught, is said to have drawn students from Babylon and Greece. Buddhist monks from China and other countries came to Nalanda. Today, the appeal of Yoga and of Vipasanna to people across the world – and the response to International Yoga Day – is another example.

19. Sister Nivedita was part of this tradition, and came to India and to Swamiji for enlightenment. And yet she was different. She did not come and learn a little and leave. She learnt a lot – and stayed on. She made India her life’s mission. And though born in Ireland, she became an Indian nation builder.

20. On her 150th birthday, I pay my heartfelt tributes to her. And I wish the Ramakrishna Mission the very best in its service to our people.

Thank you

Jai Hind!

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