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“ It was on 19 April 1981, on Easter, that I, with 23 of my students from Canada on a field study trip to India, had the 'darshan' of Mother Teresa in Calcutta.

A day earlier, many of us had visited one of the many hospice centres Mother Teresa ran as 'Missionaries of Charity' in Calcutta and saw for ourselves how young sisters were tending to the sick and the dying with mesmerizing dedication.

I was both repulsed and moved by what I saw: I was certain I could not do even for a moment what these young sisters seemed to be doing with such extraordinary patience and grace. I had never witnessed such unconditional love in any nurse or a doctor, or a social worker or a priest or a guru or 'godman' anywhere in the world.

Why would anyone be bothered to tend to the wretched and the dying? To what purpose? I wondered. How genuine is this charity, I questioned. Is it a put on? Is it some fraud?

And thus, on Easter Sunday, the holiest day amongst the Christians, suddenly face to face with this tiny frail woman, clad in blue-striped cotton sari, who had by then become a living legend all over the world, I wanted to know her motivation for her work, which she had described as caring "for the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone."

As a young and somewhat haughty intellectual, with many theories of social reform and international

MOTHER TERESA

The Light through the Cracks



development in my head, very impatiently I blurted out to her: "Why do you do what you do? What good do you see in these miserable wretched bodies? What is the point of saving them?"

Without blinking an eye, with a benign smile on her face, she responded: "I see the suffering of Christ in them."

Since that brief encounter in 1981 with Mother Teresa, in these more than three decades, I have often reflected on the meaning and nature of suffering, of my own, of my near and dear ones, and of strangers.

Where, and how, does the sense of sympathy and empathy develop in us, if at all? Is it a natural instinct, or is it taught to us by our cultural and religious traditions?

Is the suffering Christ not unique to Christians? Are there any other tradition in which the suffering in itself is glorified?

Throughout the history, sadly, the suffering of others has often been trivialized and ignored, or dismissed as deserving. Certainly the poor and the sick and the diseased have been shunned everywhere except as objects of charity for self-glorification and religious piety.

It is thus that Mother Teresa's dedicated work for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, started in 1952, began to draw attention and admiration, first in India and then slowly all over the world. She called it the Home of the Pure Heart, *NirmalHriday*, where the abandoned and the dying on the streets of the city could have "a beautiful death ...for people who lived like animals to die like angels -- loved and wanted."

This is not the language or the sentiments of a social reformist or of a physician, or of followers of any other faith. She said once: "There's something beautiful in seeing the poor accept their lot, to suffer it like Christ's Passion."

On another occasion, she comforted a sufferer by saying: "You are suffering, that means Jesus is kissing

you." The infuriated man screamed, "Then tell your Jesus to stop kissing me."

Ironically, she said all this and much more in the state of West Bengal in India, which had been ruled for several decades by the Marxists, and for whom the idea of charity was an anathema to social justice.

Yet who could possibly compete with her dedication and love which she, and thousands of sisters in her mission, so abundantly gave over several decades to the ignored, impoverished and the marginalized in India and in over hundred countries in the world.

This week Mother Teresa was declared 'Saint Teresa of Calcutta' by the Roman Catholic Church in accordance with its own rules and rituals, and its own politics.

Saints and martyrs have always been great tools for stirring up the followers in the hands of those whose goals are often political and self-serving.

Yet for all the adoration, accolades and honours for Mother Teresa, there is no dearth of petty and mean-spirited attacks on her for her opposition to abortion, for her insistence on charity rather than on structural changes in the society, and on her invocation of Christian dogmas and imagery of suffering.

"She didn't serve humanity," one Hinduattva follower in India proclaimed, "but Christianity."

Recently a former Supreme Court Judge in India, MarkandeyKatju called her "reactionary semi educated fundamentalist, fanatic and fraud", and insisted that he too would "work among the poor and homeless" if someone gives him \$10 million.

In the 20th century I believe there are three people who have come to represent human spirit at its noblest: Saint Mother Teresa for her love and service to the most wretched and the marginalized of the world; Mahatma Gandhi for non-violence as a tool against oppression even of the most mighty empires, and the Dalai Lama for his spiritual humanism even in the face of provocation of his own followers.

None of these three people were - or is - without quirks and eccentricities.

All three of them have been used and abused by many. All three of them came, or returned, to India by some twist of fate and flourished there.

India is where they lit their light, but they all took that light to every corner of the world, through many cracks.

In the words of Canadian poet Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.