

COVER STORY

A life of selfless caring

Her philosophy on some issues met with criticism, but for her work of charity she will be remembered as Mother Teresa of the Poor.

PARVATHI MENON

MOTHER TERESA will be remembered for many things, but the most enduring memory of her will be that of a person who translated ideas into action quickly - a doer unwavering in her purpose, an unstoppable person. Government bureaucracy and red tape, the criticism of her detractors, the hardship of the street, her close encounters with human misery and her own declining health in the last years of her life - before none of these did she accept defeat. Mother Teresa got on with her job: that of serving the poorest of the poor.

PARTH SANYAL



This trait of Mother Teresa's manifested itself from the day she took the decision to give up the life of a nun and teacher in St. Mary's School, a part of the Loreto Convent in the Calcutta suburb of Entally, and step into the streets. She made up her mind while on a train to Darjeeling in September 1946. "The message was quite clear, it was an order," Mother Teresa later told her biographer, Navin Chawla. "He wanted me to be poor and to love Him in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor."

What factors underlay the decision of a 36-year-old nun, a teacher for 17 years, remembered for her ordinariness and simplicity (and a sense of fun: "She would hold her waist with both hands and bend double with laughter," recalled a colleague) to leave the protection of the convent and serve the poorest? What Mother Teresa described as an "inner command" or a "Call within a Call" was a profoundly religious and personal experience for her.

Did developments outside the four walls of the convent influence her in taking this decision? The early 1940s were tumultuous years. Following the outbreak of the Second World War came the Great Bengal Famine, in which millions died of starvation. Calcutta was inundated with thousands of starving people and resources were scarce. Then came the communal riots and massacres that accompanied Partition, which was followed by an influx of refugees from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Calcutta was bursting at its seams - slums and shantytowns mushroomed. Mother Teresa lived through these cataclysmic times and could not have remained unaffected by what was happening around her.

It was in July 1948 that Mother Teresa formally received the Vatican decree granting the Indent of Exclaustration, which meant that she would remain a nun but be allowed to work outside the convent. Her first question on hearing the news from her spiritual director, Father van Exem, was: "Excuse me, Father, can I go to the slums now?" She wore the white *sari* with blue band that would become the uniform of her Congregation for the first time in August 1948. It is from this point that the saga of Mother Teresa began.



MOTHER TERESA had come a long way from being a young aspirant to novicehood who left her native town of Skopje in 1928. (Skopje, which was in the kingdom of Albania, eventually became part of Yugoslavia. After the break-up of Yugoslavia, Skopje became part of Macedonia.) Born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu on August 26, 1910, the youngest of three children, Mother Teresa's early life was influenced most by her mother, a deeply religious person who took on the role of breadwinner of the family after the death of her husband when Agnes was just seven. By the age of 18, Agnes knew that she wanted to be a nun of the Loreto order, members of which she learnt were working in Bengal. She reached Calcutta in January 1929 after a short stay in Ireland. She spent the next 17 years as a teacher.

After four months of training with the Medical Mission Sisters in Patna in 1948, Mother Teresa returned to Calcutta. She began by starting a 'school' in Motijhil, one that did not have a roof, furniture, books and pencils! And of course she had no money. But she plunged into work and had several things going at the same time - another school in Tijala, by which time she was able to raise enough money to rent rooms for the Motijhil school. In the first fortnight of her work she had started a school and a dispensary, and had acquired a band of helpers along the way.

Between February 1949 and February 1953, Mother Teresa lived in 14 Creek Lane on the upper floor of the house of Michael Gomes. Here she was joined by her student Subashini Das, the future Sister Agnes. Another student, Magdalena Gomes, also joined Mother Teresa and took the name of Sister Gertrude. Over the next two years the number of Sisters swelled to 30. In October 1950, the congregation of the Missionaries of Charity was canonically erected and its constitution written. Unique to the congregation was the fourth vow of "Wholehearted and Free service to the poorest of the poor." It was also in 1950 that she took up Indian citizenship.

In February 1953, twenty-seven Sisters of the Missionaries of Charity moved into the three-storeyed building at 54A Lower Circular Road (now Acharya Jagdish Chandra Bose Road), which came to be known as Mother House.

FINDING space for a project and finding money to start it never posed a problem for Mother Teresa. Thus, the start-up time for a project was remarkably short. Mother Teresa's make-do style very soon became part of the work culture of the Missionaries of Charity, and it explains the swiftness with which they are able establish their missions in any part of the world they are required to go to.

Take Nirmal Hriday, the home for the Dying Destitutes in Kalighat. When Mother Teresa found hospitals refusing to take in destitutes who were left to die on the streets, she decided to start a home for them. She first used a rented room in the Motijhil slum, which she soon found to be hopelessly inadequate. She went to the Chief Medical Officer of the Calcutta Municipality and asked him to provide her space for her venture. Recognising the public value of the work she was doing, he offered her two large halls of a choultry, or community hall, in the Kalighat temple. This was in 1952; there are such centres now in several parts of the country.

Through the decade of the 1950s Mother Teresa set up a number of centres that were to be replicated in structure and organisation all over the world. Other than Nirmal Hriday, the Shishu Bhavan was set up close to Mother House in 1956. A leprosy centre was started in Titagarh in 1958; after land was donated to the Missionaries of Charity in 1961, it became the Gandhiji Prem Nivas Leprosy Centre. Mother Teresa and the Sisters of the Missionaries of Charity became a common sight in Calcutta, working in slums, in homes, on the streets, organising soup kitchens, treating the leprosy afflicted, helping destitutes off the streets, caring for those turned away from hospitals.

ALEXIS DUCOLS / AP



August 15, 1982: At the Missionaries of Charity school in East Beirut, Mother Teresa talks to one of the children she evacuated from a psychiatric hospital in West Beirut that was damaged by Israeli shelling.

She and her band of missionaries would fearlessly enter riot and war zones. In the communal disturbances in Calcutta after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, Mother Teresa was on the streets personally conducting her mission of peace by taking people from point to point in the distinctive blue and white vans of her order. A senior Indian diplomat who was in Lebanon during its civil war, and who accompanied Mother Teresa as she crossed the 'green line' between East and West Beirut, recalled how the guns fell silent along the line each time Mother Teresa was sighted there. In January 1993 she was in Mumbai, visiting the riot-hit areas of

Mahim, Sitadevi Temple Road, Bandra East, Kherwadi, Nehru Nagar and Golibar, spending time with the riot victims. In 1993, she was at work in the earthquake-affected areas Maharashtra.

Awards and titles, a partial list

Padma Shri	1962
Magsaysay Award	1962
Pope John XXIII Peace Prize	1971
Joseph Kennedy Junior Foundation Award	1971
Prize of the Good Samaritan, Boston	1971
Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding	1972
Angel of Charity Award	1972
Templeton Prize	1973
Albert Schweitzer International Prize	1975
Nobel Prize for Peace	1979
Bharat Ratna	1980
Order of Merit	1983
Presidential Medal of Freedom, United States	1985
Bharat ki Suputri title	1992
Rajiv Gandhi Sadbhavana Award	1993
Albania's Golden Honour of the Nation	1994
Honorary Citizenship of the United States	1996
Congressional Gold Medal, United States	1997

The first honour that Mother Teresa received in recognition of her work was the Padma Shri in 1962. Since then accolades have been showered on her; they include the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and India's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna, in 1980. All of these Mother Teresa accepted with humility, not hesitating, in the name of the poor, to convert the prizes into money that could be used for her work.

SUSHANTA PATRONOBISH



Among the mourners who queued up outside St. Thomas' Church.

Mother Teresa's health went into decline in 1989 when she had a second, near fatal, heart attack. A pacemaker was implanted in her. In 1990 she announced her intention to resign as Superior-General but was re-elected in a secret ballot with only one dissenting vote - her own. In 1996 she fell and broke a collar-bone, which necessitated hospitalisation again. In 1997, Sister Nirmala was elected Superior-General. Mother Teresa kept indifferent health until her death on September 5.

Mother Teresa has not been without her critics. Criticism against her has stemmed broadly from

two positions. In India the Hindu Right made her the target of a slanderous and communal campaign. The Bharatiya Janata Party, which had only recently expressed its disapproval of her support for the extension of reservation for Christian Dalits, unequivocally praised her after her death and sent Atal Behari Vajpayee to attend her funeral. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad was under no such constraint, and opposed the Government's decision to give her a state funeral. Giriraj Kishore, VHP secretary, was reported as saying that "her first duty was to the Church and social service was incidental." He accused her of conducting "secret baptisms" of the dying and favouring Christians among the poor in rendering succour. Both these charges, as those who have worked with her have attested, are patently false and have made no impact on the public perception of her work, especially in Calcutta.

THE second line of criticism against Mother Teresa's work and outlook comes from the ultra-Left. It raises more serious issues, notably, the question of Mother Teresa's opposition to contraception and abortion. The criticisms coalesced in Christopher Hitchens' polemical tract, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (Verso 1995 and Indus 1996). Although the book raised important and relevant critical issues about her philosophy and work, it turned out to be a hatchet job. In a film, *Hell's Angel*, made for Britain's Channel 4 television, Tariq Ali accused her, among other things, of being part of a Vatican-controlled right-wing conspiracy, of hobnobbing with the glamorous and dubious and accepting donations from them, and of conning the world into believing that she has been the saviour of the poor of Calcutta. This offensive outraged Mother Teresa's admirers, although she reacted with predictable mildness, 'forgave' Ali, and, as was her wont, got on with her work.

But the issue of Mother Teresa's vehement opposition to abortion and contraception, stemming from the rigid Catholic 'pro-life' position, is one that troubles many people, including those who support her activities the world over. It was an issue she sought to make the centre of her speech after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. It is after a long battle that women's groups in India and other Third World countries have succeeded in getting governments and organisations such as the World Health Organisation to see the need to provide appropriate contraceptive options that are acceptable to women for successful population programmes. The damaging impact of repeated childbirth on the health of women is all-too-obvious, and it has been distressing for women's groups to find a person with the influence of Mother Teresa squarely in the other camp.

On the issue of abortion, Mother Teresa's was a fundamentalist position, one that was firmly allied with the Pope's hard-line position. Mother Teresa went so far as to appeal to victims of rape during the Bangladesh war not to terminate their pregnancies; the Pope, naturally, wanted the more recent victims of rape in Bosnia to follow the same course. At a public Mass in Knock, Ireland, in 1992, Mother Teresa said: "Let us promise Our Lady who loves Ireland so much that we will never allow in this country a single abortion. And no contraceptions."

Honorary doctorates

University of San Diego
Harvard University
Madras University
Viswa-Bharati
Cambridge University
The Catholic University

In 1995, just before a referendum in Catholic-dominated Ireland was narrowly passed to end a constitutional ban on divorce and remarriage, Mother Teresa circulated a hand-written letter urging a "no" vote.

On this there is not likely to be a change in the thinking of the Missionaries of Charity. Sister Nirmala re-emphasised before reporters support to Mother Teresa's opposition to abortion and contraception a few days after Mother Teresa's death.

ONE of Mother Teresa's critics said: "She was a staunch ally of the present Pope in his battle, within the Church, against the 'social gospel' and other liberal heresies."

Dissent against some of the more doctrinaire positions of the Roman Catholic Church has come from Catholics in all parts of the world through the years. In Latin America, the liberation theologians have sided with revolutionary movements, the requirement of celibacy has been challenged, homosexual groups have demanded that they be considered true Catholics, there have been demands for the ordination of women, and the very notion of Papal infallibility has been questioned. There has also been considerable debate on the need to stop ranking the 'sin' of abortion on a par with contraception. On all these issues, there was never any question where Mother Teresa stood.

Her critics have not failed to note the fact that while the Roman Catholic Church turned a deaf ear to the demands of women Catholics to preach, it made an exception in the case of Mother Teresa; the reason for making such an exception is her peerless credibility as an ambassador for the Church.

Although bound by the Church and the Papacy, Mother Teresa also rose above it - by her direct engagement with the problem of poverty. In her early struggle to set up a congregation wholly devoted to the service of the poor, she challenged the Papacy of the time and won. It was in the Church's long-term interest to permit her to carry on her mission, just as it was in the immediate interest of Pope John Paul II to allow the opening of a soup kitchen within the Vatican for the destitutes of Rome. As Navin Chawla has noted: "Not only does it serve as an acknowledgement of the presence of the poor, it has helped to demystify the aura of the Vatican as an oasis of great splendour and wealth."

MOTHER TERESA used to refer to herself as a "non-political" person. This may have been her self-perception, but as a public figure she was by no means so. In the first place, she exercised her right to vote in every election, thus legitimately affirming her involvement in the political process. Secondly, in the international context, she has time and again been seen to have acted politically by her public involvement in essentially Right-wing political campaigns - as in Ireland - against abortion, contraception, divorce and remarriage. By contrast in India, responding to the growth of minority and Dalit consciousness in the 1990s, Mother Teresa moved to progressive political positions on secularism and Dalit rights. She was one among a number of signatories who called for communal peace after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and she also backed the demand for reservation for Dalit Christians.

Mother Teresa, then, had two personas. One was the ideologically retrogressive adherent to the views of the Papacy under John Paul II (in

fact, the crystallisation of her own perceptions on these matters predate the present Papacy). The other was the trail-blazer who put Christian charity into action as no one else has done in the modern age. It is the second persona that the world will remember - Mother Teresa of the Poor.

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