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## TRIBUTE

# Remembering Mother Teresa

NAVIN CHAWLA

*"What we are doing is nothing but a drop in the ocean. But if we didn't do it, the ocean would be less because of that missing drop. I do not agree with the big way of doing things. To me what matters is an individual. To get to love the person, we must come in close contact with him or her. If we wait till we get the numbers, then we will be lost in numbers. And we will never be able to show the love and respect for that person. Every person is Christ for me, and since there is only one Jesus, that person is the one person in the world at that moment."*

*"I have never been in need but I accept whatever people give me for the poor. I never refuse them because they have a right to give in charity. I accept whatever. I only feel angry when I see people throwing away things that we could use."*

- Mother Teresa in conversation with Navin Chawla, Calcutta, March 24, 1996.



**Scene One:** Ten years ago, I headed the Health Department of Delhi State. Amongst the 14 hospitals in my charge was a hospital for mental diseases. I had inspected this hospital on many occasions. The first of these inspections opened me to the world of the mentally disabled so vividly that I will always carry the memory of the acute patients, who could well have been described as the inmates of a jail, padlocked as they were in the most pitiable conditions. I soon discovered that in spite of my own will power and the abundant financial resources of the administration, I was not able to make the slightest dent in the welfare of these patients. Most of the doctors and nurses were reluctant to serve in the hospital, not only because working with the severely mentally disabled is extremely difficult at the best of times, but also because the hospital was considered very low in the pecking order in terms of apparent prestige.



Even on my last visit at the end of that tenure, things had only marginally improved. My abiding memory is of two dozen completely naked men, crouched in terror in one corner of the hall, their clothes and blankets which they themselves had torn into shreds, their bodies unwashed, as if they had not been bathed for weeks. More than anything else I remember the despair in their eyes.

**September 5 marked Mother Teresa's third death anniversary.**

**Scene Two:** Ten years later, at Motherhouse, Calcutta. "Have you ever been to Tengra?" Mother Teresa asked me that morning in Calcutta. "The government asked me to take care of mentally handicapped girls who were in jails. I said I would take them all but I needed space. So the government gave me 16 acres of land at the price of one rupee a year, just imagine, and I put up the buildings. It is a very beautiful work, go and see it."

As soon as I entered the locality of Tengra I stopped to ask for directions. No one seemed to know where Shanti Dan was. "Mother Teresa's home," I said. 'Oh, Mother Teresa' came a

chorus in unison, and several hands pointed in the general direction of a large walled complex. Here I met Sister Bella. I asked if I could look around. The building, I noticed, was a new one that contained three dormitories on each of its two floors. I had long since got used to seeing spotless floors in Mother Teresa's institutions, but here there was an almost luxurious quality about the way everything had been arranged. The rooms themselves were bright and airy with ceiling fans, and each bed had its mosquito net. Colourful chequered bedlinen had been woven by the leprosy patients in Tirigarh. Not a pin seemed out of place. There was no sign of volunteers or paid workers. I gathered that Mother Teresa did not permit them to help here, because the patients were encouraged to keep themselves and their environment clean as a necessary part of occupational therapy. As I passed groups of patients I expected to encounter anger or hostility. Instead they greeted me with warm *namastes* and many waved to me.

"When they came here two years ago, they would not put on their clothes. They could not eat properly. When we tried to go near them, they would cower with fear in a corner. Now they do most things themselves. Some of these women have been in jail wards for years on end. We have come very far in this time. It is only when they are really sick or feeling low that they go inside to lie down during the day, otherwise they sit in or tend the gardens, or do simple work in the crafts centre. See these dolls here," said the Sister, pointing to some neatly-handcrafted items on a shelf. "These are done by some of these girls." I noticed some little handmade bags, one on every bed, and asked what they were. "Schoolbags," said the Sister with a laugh. A benefactor donated all of them along with some books - alphabets and simple story books - and items of stationery. Soon teachers volunteered to give lessons and now they really look forward to their classes. Small things make them so happy!"

I spent the better part of the day at Shanti Dan. The land was given to Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity on lease by Jyoti Basu, the redoubtable Chief Minister of West Bengal. He is, perhaps, the only person for whom Mother Teresa invariably prefixed the words 'My friend' before she took his name. It was well known in Calcutta that Mother Teresa could walk into his office at any time. And I am informed that he only said "Yes Mother," and

gave her whatever she wanted because it was invariably for the poor. When Jyoti Basu asked her to do something for the mentally-disturbed women inmates locked up in the Calcutta Jail, Mother Teresa asked only for land. Here, in the middle of the Tengra slums she constructed a number of buildings to house the sick and mentally disabled women and to provide for their rehabilitation. She planted trees for fruit and for shade. Those who could use their hands in some way were encouraged to do so. As a result, some made handicrafts, others attended to the gardens, yet others did some agricultural work. Those whose spirit had already been broken, would simply sit on the benches under the trees, and pondered their troubled past in the serenity of their present.

So, it was not a little astonishing for me that this group of 200 or so women, some of whom had spent practically their entire lives in jail, could be looked after by just four Sisters. They themselves attended to all their work, kept themselves and their surroundings clean, grew vegetables, and cooked their own food, and all this in peace and quiet. From the hustle and bustle of Calcutta, I had been transported into an oasis of calm. Not surprisingly, the irony of my having been able to do so little compared to what had been created by this little woman with her small band of dedicated Sisters, has never left me. There was no need for me to labour the point that only faith and compassion could have made this work possible.

The next day, I went back to Mother Teresa and I told her about my visit to Tengra. She nodded, not particularly surprised, and in her practical way went on to say: "Two Buddhist monks from Japan came to see me some years ago. I told them that we have a practice that on Fridays none of us eats during the day, and with the money that is saved, we buy food for the poor. I did not know that when they went back to Japan, they told other monks about it. Soon the word spread (in Japan) and many people began to give up a meal a day and put the money aside. One day they sent me all the money they had collected. Wonderful, no? With that I was able to build another floor of the building for the girls in Tengra which you saw yesterday. Then I was able to take a hundred more women from the jail. In fact twenty-two more are coming next week. God has such wonderful ways of providing."

*Navin Chawla is the author of Mother Teresa and Faith and Compassion. He is currently Chairman of the Pondicherry Power Corporation and Principal Secretary (Power, Ports, Art and Culture) to the Government of Pondicherry.*

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