

SAINT OF THE  
GUTTERS

Prof. Neerja Mattoo



Prof. Neerja Mattoo did her M.A. in English from Kashmir University in 1958. She became professor and principal (1981) in Govt College for Women, M.A. Road, from where she had graduated in 1956. She stayed in the same college till her retirement in 1995. She was awarded a visitorship by the British Council in order to research at the Oxford University, in 1984. She was also awarded a Senior Fellowship in Literature by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, GOI in 1998 to work on four Kashmiri women poets.

Her publications include *Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh – A Trefoil land*, *The Stranger Beside Me* (Translation of Kashmiri short stories in English), *Contemporary Kashmiri Short Stories*, *Saal: A Feast of Kashmiri Cooking*.

Neerja Mattoo lives in Srinagar with her husband.



How many of us are willing to devote our life for the betterment of the poor and the needy. True worship lies in the service of mankind.

One of the greatest figures of the twentieth century is a woman, known all over the world as Mother Theresa. She did not hold any powerful position in politics or government, yet she ruled over the hearts and minds of countless numbers of people in almost every country. She was awarded the highest honours by a grateful world, including the Nobel Peace Prize. She had no material possessions of her own, as she had dedicated herself to a life of poverty and a humble submission to God, yet the rich, the famous and the powerful flocked to her to become a part of her mission and to give some real meaning to their lives. How did she acquire this stature? Let us trace the journey of this saint of our times in order to find an answer to this question.



On 26 August, 1910 a girl child was born in Skopje, a city which was a part of Albania at that time, but later became a part of Yugoslavia. She was named

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. Her father, a successful businessman, died when she was eight. Then the family was looked after by the mother, Drana, whose skill at stitching and needlecraft provided her with a livelihood. The family was raised in a devout Roman Catholic tradition. Right from her childhood, Agnes would love to spend time in the church, decorating it with flowers, hanging flags and banners for festivals and singing in the church choir. She was also a keen listener to stories of Christian Missionaries going to different parts of the world to serve, educate and tend to the poor, the illiterate and the sick. Their life of dedication fascinated her. These activities alone, however, would not make her out as an exception. It was when she was fifteen that something happened that charted an entirely different course for her.

She was on a trip to the mountains when suddenly she had a feeling that someone was calling out to her, saying, “Follow God and serve others”. In our own Eastern mystic tradition too, it is believed that an inner voice calls out to a person if God has some special task cut out for him or her. So this experience of hers should not come as a surprise to us. About this time Agnes had also heard that somewhere out there is a place called India and had already made up her mind to become a missionary. She now decided to leave home, become a nun, lead a life of poverty and chastity and serve the people. She had also resolved that she would go to Kolkata in India to serve the poorest of the poor – that was to be the mission of her life. As preparation for her real mission, she went to Ireland and joined the convent of “The Sisters of Loreto” in order to learn English before she went to Bengal.

Agnes arrived in Kolkata in 1929 and was sent by her Order to Darjeeling in West Bengal to begin her novitiate, i.e., the period of study and prayer which every nun must undergo before she finally becomes a nun at the convent. Apart from prayer, she spent her time here in learning Hindi and Bengali, so that she could speak to the people whom she had come to serve. Then she began to teach in schools run by the Sisters of Loreto, first at Darjeeling and then at Kolkata.

She took her final vows as a nun in 1937 and assumed the name ‘Theresa’, because that was the name of the patron saint of missionaries.

While teaching the Indian girl students from affluent backgrounds at St. Mary’s school, Kolkata, Sister Theresa, as she was now called, could not keep her eyes away from the desperately poor and homeless who lived on the streets of the city, in slums. The conditions in which they existed were appallingly unhygienic. The filth and stink were nauseating and it was no wonder that they suffered from all kinds of diseases. Sister Theresa could see that the hospitals and other civic amenities were stretched to the limit in this teeming metropolis, so she would sometimes carry the worst cases off the street herself, clean them up and look after them till they recovered or died. She could not bear to see anyone dying without the dignity that every death deserves.

One day in 1946, when she was travelling in a train from Kolkata to Darjeeling, she again heard a voice, like the one she had heard before, telling her that now she must leave the convent and help the poor by living with them. She felt that it was an order which she could not disobey

and to quote her words, ‘to fail would be to break faith’. This was the final turning point that gave birth to the Mother Theresa we all know about.

She asked her church order to give her permission to leave the convent and to start a new order of nuns who would help her in her work among the poor. She got the permission and the order of the “Missionaries of Charity” was born in 1948, with her as its first Mother Superior.

Now she gave up her nun’s habit and dressed in a cotton blue bordered white sari which reflected her simplicity. She wanted to look like the poor Indian women, who dressed similarly with their heads covered by the sari. She set up Nirmal Hriday, home and hospices for the poor, the orphans and the dying. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Now began her great, legendary work of selfless charity and care to the poor. In 1970, Malcolm Muggeridge, a well known British writer came to Kolkata. While walking through a street, he happened to see a small little figure in a slum, cleaning the sores on the body of a half-dead man without the slightest trace of disgust at the stench. He could not believe that a human being could look so happy while doing such a repelling task. The deep, warm glow of peace and love on her face, while cheerfully busy in her unflinching service to the wretched of the earth, made such a deep impression on his mind that he wanted the whole world to know about this saintly person and her extraordinary work.. The result was his book and a documentary film on Mother Theresa, appropriately titled, *Something Beautiful for God*, which brought world attention to her otherwise quiet work.

Before her death in 1997, she oversaw the opening of branches of her “Missionaries of Charity” in a number of countries to continue her work among the poorest of the poor.

Mother Theresa used to say that one must give love till it hurts. She was truly a saint of our times, who brought comfort to the destitute, gave care to those who had no one to care for them and made the most insignificant and unwanted human feel that God, through the agency of Mother Theresa, remembered them.

## Glossary

<b>flock (v)</b> <i>fłɒk</i>	to move together in large numbers.
<b>stature</b> <i>'stætʃ.ə'</i>	the good reputation a person or organization has; status.
<b>choir</b> <i>kwaɪə'</i>	a group of people who sing together, especially in a church.
<b>chastity</b> <i>'tʃæstəti</i>	purity.
<b>affluent</b> <i>'æfluənt</i>	rich.
<b>slums</b> <i>slʌmz</i>	an overcrowded area of a city in which the housing is typically in very bad condition.
<b>appalling</b> <i>ə'pɔ:lɪŋ</i>	very bad, or much worse than expected.
<b>filth</b> <i>fɪlθ</i>	extreme dirt.

stink stɪŋk

extremely unpleasant smell.

teeming 'ti:mɪŋ

to have an extremely large number of people in a place.



### Thinking about the Text

1. What activities made Mother Theresa so exceptional?
2. Why did Mother Theresa leave St.Mary High school?
3. What did Mother Theresa mean by 'to fail would be to break faith'?
4. What kind of life did Mother Theresa lead?
5. Why do you think Mother Theresa learnt Bengali?
6. What did Malcolm Muggeridge see on the streets of Calcutta?



### Language Work

She was five feet tall and slender of built. Draped in a blue bordered white sari (which cost less than fifty rupees) spoke of her simplicity and grandeur. Her wrinkled face never marred her spirit to serve the poor and the needy. She did beautiful things to make this world a happier place to live in. Nobody cares for the dying and the diseased but she cared for those who were left unloved. In 1946, while going to Darjeeling, she heard the call to give up everything and follow Him to the slums to serve Him among the poorest of the poor. Truly a philanthropist, she dedicated her life to the poor people who needed her the most.

#### Fill in the blanks:

1. Her wrinkled face in the passage means her\_\_\_\_\_.
2. Him refers to\_\_\_\_\_.
3. Mother Theresa was a \_\_\_\_\_ because she loved mankind.
4. Her spirit to serve the poor and the needy was never \_\_\_\_\_ by her old age.
5. To live a life of \_\_\_\_\_ was the hallmark of Mother Theresa's personality.

#### Make sentences of the following:

Flock

Humble

Dignity

Mystic

Desperate



## Writing Work

Malcolm Muggeridge titled the biography of Mother Theresa *Something Beautiful for God*. What do you understand by beautiful? What were the things that made Mother Theresa beautiful?

## Discussion

In the fast and competitive modern world how can one adhere to the values of kindness and love? Discuss with your group mates.

## Suggested Reading

*Romain Roland* by M.K. Gandhi

### *Tongue Twister*

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickledpeppers.

Did Peter Piper pick a peck of pickled peppers?

If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,

where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?