

**Consulate General of India
New York**

**125th Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's Historic Addresses
at the World's Parliament of Religions
September 1893, Chicago**

**Remarks by Sandeep Chakravorty, Consul General of India at
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**Swami Vivekananda-
India's Spiritual Ambassador to the West**

Namaskar! Good Morning to all of you. My esteemed and venerable Swami Yuktatmananda, Barry and other members of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York and Dear Friends.

I thank the Center for this invitation to speak on the occasion commemorating the 125th Anniversary of Swamiji's historic addresses at the Parliament of Religions in 1893. I am about to speak about a Man and on a topic, on which my scholarship, I must confess, is overwhelmed by passion and emotions. It is indeed a blessing and an honour that Swami Yuktatmananda has extended this opportunity to me. I am truly grateful.

Today we will talk about the impact Swamiji had on the West, particularly in the US. Swamiji's participation in the Parliament of Religions was an epoch making and historical event as it brought to the world stage not only the recognition of Hinduism as one of the great religions of the world but also for bringing forth the values that infuse Hinduism which are today known and considered as universal values. Always stressing the universal and humanistic side of the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism, as well as belief in service rather than dogma. Swamiji infused vigour into Hindu thought, placing less emphasis on the prevailing pacifism.

Hindus and Hinduism are autochthonous to the land we know as India. The religion defines India and its people and in turn is defined by it. Every part of India, every grain of sand, every season, every rain drop has contributed to this body of thought, belief, practice and rituals, since times immemorial. Our philosophy and our ideology belongs to our land, our water, our groves and our mountain ranges. Our Shiva resides in Mount Kailas and our Krishna frolicked in the groves of Gokula and Shri Rama roamed the forests of Dandaka or Kishkinda. It is possible to connect our Gods, our stories to our land. To this land of the Hindus came Christianity, the Zoroastrianism, Islam and other faiths. Also other faiths flowered within India, such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as Hinduism incorporated and coexisted with pristine beliefs such as animism and nature worship. The point to note here is that while India received and welcomed or incorporated within its folds other faiths, there was general

lack of knowledge about the mother of religions in the West, while the East had been influenced by Hinduism and other great faiths of India.

But the West was another story. Although there had been travellers and explorers such as Marco Polo and Vasco da Gama and others, they focussed primarily on the material aspects of the East rather than the spiritual. So much so, that the West saw India and Indians as spiritually backward and fit for conversion to Christianity. We need to roll our imagination back a couple of hundred years when along with the merchants of East India Companies came preachers and missionaries who thought that Indians had to be uplifted from their spiritual misery. One such example was William Carey who set up his operations in the Danish colony of Serampore. He travelled to India with missionary zeal but was quickly overwhelmed by the richness and diversity of our scriptures that he took upon the task of translating many of them into English. He established in 1816 the Serampore College, the oldest University College in India.

The West saw India as a spiritual wilderness largely not permeated by the wisdom of the Church. In this firmament breaks in Swamiji, with his vision and wisdom of not only spiritual awakening of India but he was also perhaps the first to plant the seeds of the India's national movement. To call him the first spiritual Ambassador of India in the modern era would perhaps diminish his stature. He was the India's first modern saint. He represented India and Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions, but I believe he represented the hope of mankind. He did not only represent Hindus but made a call for a Religion for the World based on the humanistic values of Vedanta and unity of God.

Today it is fashionable to talk of peace, understanding, compassion, tolerance, human rights, civil rights and humanism. But these words and their meanings were not in currency then. Colonization was at its peak and world powers were merrily busy in subjugating peoples for exploiting them and they were happy to use the religion as a weapon for colonization. It is this context and scenario in which we have to evaluate Swamiji, his vision and impact.

A little-known fact of the Parliament of Religion is the Archbishop of Canterbury, the senior bishop and principal leader of the Church of England, refused to send anyone to represent the Church of England at the Parliament because he could not even think of Christianity being on the same platform as other religions!

The Parliament was an adjunct of the World's Columbian Exposition, organized in Chicago to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus. One of the main goals of the Exposition was to disseminate knowledge of progress in the world, especially in science and technology, that had been brought about by learned people in the West. Religion being an important aspect of human culture, it was decided to organize a Parliament of Religions. The Parliament marked the first concerted effort to get the representatives of all religions of the world to share their views. It commenced on September 11, 1893.

Here it is important to highlight the inherently human nature of Swamiji. He was initially seized with panic and fright when on stage at the massive Columbus Hall in

Chicago, under the glare of seven thousand pairs of eyes from the hall below and the gallery above which were trained on him. Many had spoken since then from prepared speeches and the audience had applauded them politely. There was, however, one who had not yet spoken and who seemed to have passed over several chances to do so. His attire and demeanour compelled their attention. In his ochre robes and turban, this magnetic presence exuded strength. At long last, Dr. Barrows, the master of ceremonies introduced Swamiji who now rose to address the audience. He had no paper in his hand and was clearly intending to speak extempore. The silence as he composed his thoughts was absolute; all breaths were hushed and faces turned eagerly towards him. And then, at last, he spoke. Surveying the gathering, he bowed his head and began with, 'Sisters and Brothers of America'. He could not proceed, thereafter, for the thunderous applause that followed his simple yet heartfelt greeting rang and echoed through the columns of the Hall, deafening all who were present. When Swamiji resumed his speech after almost two minutes, he commanded everyone's attention as effortlessly as before. What is remarkable is that while representatives of other religions spoke of the greatness of their religions, Swamiji's message was Universal. I quote to you some excerpts of his inaugural address

"I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. The present convention, ...is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me."

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal."

His Address at the final session on September 27, 1893 was no less spectacular in bringing out the essence of the philosophy of our land that all religions lead to the same God. He declared, *if any one here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom from the bottom of my heart and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written in spite of resistance: "Help and not fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."* *Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid... The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.*

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.

Later, in a talk that he gave at the People's Church in Washington D.C., on October 28, 1894, he said, 'Religion is not in books, not in forms, not in sects, not in nations: religion is in the human heart ... It is love alone that can conquer hatred.'

Following his inaugural address all the dailies announced that his speech was the most popular one of the day and he thus became known to all of America in one stroke. In a letter to his supporter Alasinga Perumal, he notes wryly that his heart 'was fluttering' and that his tongue 'nearly dried up'. For this reason, he declined to speak when his turn came several times over until he could postpone it no longer. Even then, Swamiji was remarkably humble and unassuming about the effect of his speech on the American people and the press. To Alasinga, he remarked, 'you would be astonished if I sent to you the newspaper cuttings, but you already know that I am a hater of celebrity. Never before had an 'Oriental' made such an impression on the people of America.

The most resounding vindication of Swamiji's stance was provided by the newspaper Herald. It noted, 'Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him, we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation.

We need to analyse and reflect upon what is there in Swamiji's message which appealed to the West. He made two assertions: one was inherent unity of man and man and man to nature and secondly the unity of all religions and therefore god. The essence of his teaching was Vedanta, a philosophy based on the teachings of the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita and the Vedanta Sutra, which he interpreted as a living philosophy: a feeling of oneness with all beings that was manifested through love for all. For this, it was essential to believe that every being was divine and that, therefore, to serve others was to serve God himself. All faiths led to the same goal – a conviction that Sri Ramakrishna had experienced for himself.

Swamiji did not consider science antithetical to religion. He showed that religion is as scientific as science itself; religion is the 'science of consciousness'. As such, religion and science are not contradictory to each other but are complementary. This universal conception frees religion from the hold of superstitions and dogmatism and makes religion the highest and noblest pursuit – the pursuit of supreme Freedom, supreme Knowledge, supreme Happiness.

In his lectures in the West, Swamiji encouraged people to rethink the values that had hitherto spread only fear and hatred among the followers of diverse religions. In this way, he not only paved the way for a dialogue between faiths but also with one's own self. Thus, although Swamiji is often seen as the strongest challenge of Hinduism to Christianity and, by extension, to the British rule in India, he was also, in fact, the

strongest Hindu challenge to what the Hindus had turned their religion into by questioning their oppressive social rules and rituals.

Today more than a century after 1893 many here may be asking “what is the relevance of Swamiji’s teachings in today’s world”. One of course is what I have spoken before i.e. the values that he espoused, that are intrinsic to Hinduism but we have been diffident in vocalizing them. The universal humanism taught by Swami Vivekananda is more relevant today in a world which although is much more interconnected but is much more riven with conflicts and violence.

The second and equally important contribution is Swamiji laying down a paradigm for human survival. And today when we are threatened by environmental degradation and climate change and rising consumerism, his teachings hold great value. In this engulfing tide of amoral commercialization, it is essential to recover the ethical compass spelt out by Swamiji.

In his letter addressed to Sister Nivedita, he said ‘we are like cattle, driven to the slaughter house, hastily nibbling a bit of grass on road side, as they are driven along under the whip’. Raising a question about the entire process of human enslavement, by a small group of predators, Swamiji asserted the power of the human mind when he said ‘we hasten the growth of things by artificial means. Why cannot we hasten the growth of man? he pondered’ He suggested that a man has to take the work of his perfection in his own hands, instead of leaving it to nature. The mind has to be controlled by controlling the ceaseless pursuit of things, because that person would be acting like the fool, who, wanting to cross the river, catches hold of a crocodile, mistaking it for a log of wood. Man is Man so long as he is struggling to rise above nature, external and internal, and not as he succumbs to its contrary forces.

Swamiji posed the Indian theory of involution to supplement the Western theory of evolution. If man is an evolution from mollusc or protoplasm, then the energy of the perfect man, the Buddha or the Christ, was involved in the mollusc or protoplasm. To be human is a process of becoming what human beings already are but are yet to realize, as beings in communion with the Universal Being. There is no difference between an ant and an angel and every worm is the brother of Nazarene. Swamiji thus postulated that every human is perfect and therefore needn’t be civilized to be perfect, he just had to be human. But this was against the hegemonic position of the West, objectifying the non-European world.

Explaining identity and difference as two sides of the same coin in Bhakti Yoga, Swamiji explained that, there may be millions of radii, converging towards the same center in the sun. The farther they are from the center, the greater is the distance between any two. But, as they all meet at the center, all differences vanish.

Swamiji sounded a clarion call for global fellowship when he spoke on the power of the mind, ‘your mind, my mind, all these little minds, are fragments of that universal mind, waves in the ocean, and on account of this continuity, we can convey our thoughts directly to one another’. Giving this universal approach a concrete content

Swamiji explained his Life's Mission, 'we must show the spirituality of Hindus, the mercifulness of Buddhists, the activity of Christians, the brotherhood of Mohammedans, by our practical lives'. He asked insular Indians, what country has any special claim upon me? Am I any Nation's slave? To him, globalization made India's mission very simple, 'England's power had united the nations of the world and had opened the path across the sea, so that the waves of Indian spirituality could spread till the ends of the earth. Was not the Roman Empire constructed for the victory of Christ?' However, his mission was not to spread Hinduism but to ask people to return to their own religion. He lashed out at Americans in these scathing words, 'Christ would not find a stone on which to lay his head among you. You are not Christians. Return to Christ'.

In exchange for the gospel of the Vedanta, he looked forward to receive from the West the material means to improve the conditions of Indians. This exchange was not awkward to him, because both science and Advaita (Non dualism) concluded that explanations of things ought to be found in their own nature, that the effect is nothing but the cause in another form, that creation is an evolution, and no external being are required to explain what is going on in the universe. Swamiji not only brought India's message to the West but also like a true Ambassador of his country transmitted West's message to India. The years Swamiji spent in America and Europe made him understand India better. After he went back to India in 1897 Swamiji admitted in his notes that, *'the shades are deeper, and lights brighter'*. In the West he saw many wonderful institutions and customs, and many wonderful manifestations of strength and power, but *"the most wonderful of all was to find that beneath all these apparent variations of manners and customs, of culture and power, beats the same mighty human heart under the impulsion of the same joys and sorrows, of the same weakness and strength."* Swamiji's concern for women was another aspect that came to the fore during his travels through America. Struck by their independence and self-reliance, he declared, 'There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing.

It is appropriate to remind us of the relevance of Swamiji's message in hundred twenty-five years after his addresses to the Parliament of Religions. The years that have elapsed since then, have witnessed change, never witnessed before in the biological history of the earth, in the wake of globalization, industrialization and homogenization. Accelerated bio-cultural extinction, growing discord among the human species and between human and nonhuman species, loss of variety as well as of identity have been characteristic of the past years. The human being, who may become the first agent of nature to destroy himself and his environment, would do well to remember Swamiji's life and mission, which were dedicated to building bridges between identity and difference, science and religion, nature and culture, West and the East. This anniversary should be an occasion for all of us to ponder and check the suicidal course of the human race.

Thank you. Jai Hind!