



## Clarion Call to Revisit our Roots: Chicago Address of Swami Vivekananda

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A speech delivered in less than five minutes! Just 18 sentences and 478 words! Delivered by a 29 year old, young, energetic and handsome monk unseen, unheard and unknown to many till 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1893.

Those electrifying words from the mouth of Swami Vivekananda representing Hinduism at the inaugural session of the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago turned into a perennial source of guidance and inspiration for the humankind which remains relevant today even as it was then. It brought an instant historic change in the mindset of entire Western World for its Eastern counterpart, gave a new identity of Himalayan significance to our country and established the profound message of Hinduism for the mankind.

The very beginning of his address with the words, “Sisters and Brothers of America” to greet the global audience was an enlightened awakening to the new age. The words were unique of its kind as it was a marked departure from the conventional usage of formal salutations and the result was a spontaneous and heartfelt appreciation from the audience expressed through a thunderous standing ovation that lasted more than two minutes. The audience could sense that here was a person who wasn’t just speaking from the pages of a scripture but from his experience,

from deep within his heart, within his soul. That very connect has ensured that the speech has gone down in history as one of the most famous speeches of all time.

While we are mostly aware of this beginning of speech, the less known fact is that the several thousands of delegates were so impressed with his speech that he was invited to speak five more times over the next fortnight at the congregation. This was indicative enough of the influence his message would create in the hearts and minds of humanity across the world.

Romain Rolland, the French man of Letters, was emphatic in his praise for Swamiji saying that, “his words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books at thirty years’ distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!”

The short yet epoch making speech had far reaching consequences for the event where it was delivered, the speaker who delivered it, the audience who listened, the religion which it represented and the humanity for which what it was aimed at.



The speech was delivered at the inaugural session of the World Parliament of Religions which was one of the twenty 'Congresses' on socio-cultural and economic themes held in Chicago as adjuncts to the World's Fair, known as Columbian Exposition, organized to mark the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus. The original intention of the sponsors was to bring all the main religions of the world to a common platform to consider with sympathy their differences and relative merits. By the time of its conclusion after 17 days, it had emerged as a celebration of the rich diversity in religions and cultural beliefs around the world which not only helped bringing the world together to understand different world views, but also deepened the humankind's appreciation of the common quest for peace and harmony that human beings have been engaged in since time immemorial. The undisputed anchor of this great platform was none other than Swami Vivekananda.

"Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together", thus written in the introductory letter of Prof. John Henry Wright of Harvard University for Swami Vivekananda's registration for the Parliament of Religions proved prophetic as, on the next day of his address, the newspapers of America described him as the greatest figure in the congregation. The simple monk with a begging bowl in hand, burning sincerity in words, sunshine of confidence in look and postures, crystal clear in thoughts became the man in demand. The address set the tone for the worldwide fame for him and thanks to the eminence he acquired here; what started as a trip to the Parliament of Religions extended to become a lecture tour of the America and Europe that lasted for four years. With his Chicago address, Swami Vivekananda became the beacon of Indian philosophy and spiritualism for the Western World. Mr Merwin-Marie Snell,

President of the Scientific section of the Parliament, said that Swami Vivekananda was "beyond question the most popular and influential man in the Parliament. He frequently spoke... and, on all occasions he was received with great enthusiasm than any other speaker, Christian or Pagan. The people thronged about him wherever he went and hung with eagerness on his every word."

Swami Vivekananda's rousing address, in the words of Prof. Sankari Prasad Basu, "won recognition for his country's ancient heritage, and thereby gave back to his countrymen their long-lost self-esteem and self-confidence. It is through this extempore speech that he brought out the core values of India. He declared in clear terms, "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." Such bold statements marked the advent of Western interest in Indian principles and ethos. He was instrumental in ending India's cultural isolation from the rest of the world. He, in fact, was the main architect of raising the image of India to a high pedestal as the land of spirituality, harmony and rich cultural heritage.

The grand vision of Indian thinkers found the most eloquent and sublime expression in Swami Vivekananda's exposition. He acted as a bridge between the East and the West by bringing a sea-change in the views of West which so far held the Hinduism as an absurd philosophy overridden by superstitions, dogmas and blind-beliefs completely devoid of any scientific outlook; through convincing propagation of the great moral, ethical, spiritual and cultural values of Hindu scriptures and philosophy. He also made a successful attempt to mould Indian mindset to



accept Science & Technology and humanism of the West.

In his Welcome address, he quoted two verses - one from the Shivamahimna Stotra and another from the Bhagavad Gita :

"As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they may appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

"Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me."

Speaking about Swamiji's role in giving Hinduism its distinct identity in the Parliament of Religions, Sister Nivedita wrote, "... it may be said that when he began to speak it was of the religious ideas of the Hindu's but when he ended Hinduism had been created."

Making an objective assessment of Swami Vivekananda's world culture, the eminent British historian A.L. Basham stated that, "In centuries to come, he will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world." Some of the most pressing problems of the day, threatening the survival of human civilization were foreseen by Vivekananda. Religious intolerance, cultural exclusiveness and blind fanaticism were identified by him as dangerous portents. At Chicago, he forcefully brought out that these dark forces of sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism had filled the Earth with violence and had deluged the world with rivers of human blood and brought beautiful civilizations to extinction.

For the modern world, he gave a completely new understanding of religion through his interpretation of religion as a universal

experience of transcendent reality common to all humanity. The universal conception of religion as the science of consciousness frees religion from the hold of superstitions, dogmatism, priest-craft and intolerance, and makes religion the highest and noblest pursuit – the pursuit of supreme freedom, supreme knowledge and supreme happiness. Swami Vivekananda laid the foundation for spiritual humanism by strongly advocating the concept of potential divinity of the soul which divinizes human relationships, saving it from degradation and makes life meaningful and worth living.

His steering message of oneness of religions came like a breath of fresh air for the suffocated mankind. Rising above petty matters, Vivekananda spoke of harmony, understanding and universalism. In his address at the final session of the Parliament of Religions on September 27, 1893, he called the entire world collective to end all fanaticism, all persecutions and all uncharitable feelings, and appealed for "Help and not Fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension". A century and more than a quarter after the fiery proclamations of Swamiji rocked the world, we are still looking at these words, hoping to find direction and guidance. Today when humanity is at crossroads and values cherished over the centuries are getting eroded, Swami Vivekananda's message of universality, harmony, character building, strength and courage is even more relevant. As Mark Tully writes, "He was relevant then, and is relevant today for his constant affirmation that all religions are paths to God and his call for tolerance."

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