

Swami Vivekananda's Chicago Speech 125th Year Celebration - Competition

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"The solemn charge which the Parliament preaches to all true believers is a return to the primitive unity of the world...The results may be far off, but they are certain." John Henry Barrows, 1893

In 1893, the city of Chicago hosted the World Columbian Exposition, which served as the birthplace of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions. Held on the shores of Lake Michigan, the World's Parliament of Religions marks the first formal gathering of representatives of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. Today, the 1893 Parliament is recognized as the birth of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide. A variety of spiritual leaders from around the world came to share their perspectives and engage in dialogue. A captivating Hindu monk, Swami Vivekananda, addressed 5,000 assembled delegates, greeting them with the words, "Sisters and brothers of America!" His declaration introduced Hinduism to America. Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim speakers were also present at the gathering. An unprecedented number of 19 women spoke at this Parliament from various spiritual backgrounds, signaling the beginning of a global interfaith movement.

<https://parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/new-chicago-1893/new-chicago-1893>

15) **Storming the World's Parliament of Religions** - article by Dr.R.Ilango, Vice-Principal(Rtd), Vivekananda College, Thiruvudagam, Madurai Dt.

Just eighteen sentences! Four hundred and seventy two words! Hardly three and a half minutes delivery by a 29 year old young, energetic and handsome Sannyasin! Yes, Swami Vivekananda's Chicago address on Sep 11th, 1893 at the World's Parliament stirred the entire enlightened audience of the West and established a unique place to Mother Bharath in the eyes of the world. Everybody in the audience which consisted of great philosophers, erudite scholars and cultured lot was startled by the Spiritual Tsunami - address of the Swamiji.

The short and crisp talk was marked by the following features:

1. Swamiji exploded the myth and preconceived notions of the people of the West about the Country Bharath, by highlighting our spiritual heritage and tradition. Though he did not dwell deep on the tenets of Vedanta, he sprinkled them here and there which ignited the listeners.
2. Strictly speaking, Swamiji was the only one person who adhered to the Mission-statements of the World's Parliament of Religions without swerving even a little bit, while others all the time were harping upon their own religious tenets.
3. Everyone was simply carried away by the Swamiji's eloquent and flawless English which mantled our nation's ancient wisdom.

Blowing off the misconceptions

Every word of Swamiji, pregnant with meaning, made a profound impression and removed the scales from their eyes. Every word was meticulously listened to and slowly their cloudy vision was getting cleared. They received the loving language they were awaiting so far. Though a few had already addressed them as "Sisters and brothers", when these two words came from the lips of the Swamiji they received them with boundless joy as if they were coming from their real, hugging brother and gave a standing ovation because they were the genuine words springing from the bottom of the heart of a Sannyasin whose words and thoughts coordinated perfectly. The women of the West never heard them being called as 'sisters'-a word they were longing for. It gave an impression that in our country women are looked upon either as 'sisters' or 'mothers'. This ennobled status of women must have raised their estimate of our nation. Swamiji thanked them thrice, first in the name of the Ancient order of Monks, then in the name of the Mother of religions and finally in the name of the millions and millions of the Hindu people.

Probably they were seeing a great Hindu monk alive in flesh and blood, coming in the lineage of noble sannyasins who are known for their austerity and simplicity, sages who were meditating upon subtle things like Jeevatma and Paramatma thousands of years ago while people of the rest of the world were yet to reach refinement. There must be still many Vivekanandas meditating on Soul and God in the Himalayas. He was only a specimen of the thousands of sages in the country Bharat and what would happen if all of them land on the West -probably inundating the entire continent with spiritual fervor! They should have thought like this!

Oh! This Swamiji represents Hinduism, the Mother of religions which has no date of birth and that which has no birth -date has no death- date too. It is eternal. Such an ancient religion has sent its sannyasin to Chicago's World's Parliament of Religions to highlight religious harmony! And he is the ambassador of the millions and millions of the Hindu people! Behind him an army of ardent devotees! Not a loner! Others from our country only represented societies and sects. He was the only one to speak for Hinduism. Swamiji had sufficient reasons to stand high among all other delegates.

Swamiji was silently repudiating the statement of the Archbishop of Canterbury made on the eve of the commencement of the conference"...Christian religion is the one religion. I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the quality of the intended members and parity of their position and claims."(Swami Vivekananda in Chicago-New Findings-Asim Chaudhuri.p.85) Rev.Barrows was accused of "planning treason against the church".(Asim Chaudhuri p.86).The discordant note floated by the fanatics just before the convention was proved wrong. Even the crude sketches of Swamiji appeared as caricatures in the leading newspapers of Chicago later blossomed as posters bearing his charming photos adorning the streets of Chicago. That was the benign impact of "Sisters and brothers" address. At the same time we must not miss the magnanimous statements of a Christian delegate Bishop Keane, the Catholic representative to the Parliament,"...Vivekananda can only stir us and sting us into better teachings and better

doings in the great work of Christ in the world, I for one will be profoundly grateful to our friend, the great Hindu monk”(Asim Chaudhuri P95).Unfortunate, the Bishop lost his job. (Asim Chaudhuri P95).

Swamiji’s impact is vividly described by Mervin Marie Snell,the President of the Scientific Section of the Parliament ”...there are other religions more venerable than Christianity, which surpass it in philosophical depth, in spiritual intensity, in independent vigour of thought, and in breath and sincerity of human sympathy, while not yielding to it a single hair’s breadth in ethical beauty and efficiency”.

While speaking about the spiritual treasures of our country-the Life giving Principles-Swamiji had in his mind the prevailing notions of the West about us that this is a country of elephants and cobras and pot-bellied Maharajas; women out of poverty throwing the new born babies to the starving crocodiles in the rivers. The exaggerated and utterly untrue image of our nation disappeared in a trice. The libels were deleted and real picture installed. Swamiji’s words fell upon the masses of ignorance like a bombshell.

Swamiji proudly promulgates our hereditary virtues like tolerance and universal acceptance reigning our spiritual arena for thousands of years. He proudly proclaims that our nation had sheltered the purest remnant of the Israelites when driven by the Roman tyranny. He proudly pronounces that our nation had fostered the remnant of the grand Zoroastrianism. Thus he brought to the knowledge of the world delegates these forgotten historical truths. When this nation has so many credits to be proud of why should it be slighted and smeared?-was his question. Later in his spiritual journey at one place he vehemently throws down his gauntlet before an assembly of world theologians who are ignorant of our rich tradition, “And yet you dare to judge us!”(Prabuddha Bharata-June 1908)”I have sat here today and I have heard the height of intolerance...Blood and the sword are not for the Hindu, whose religion is based on the laws of love”(Chicago Tribune Sep 20,1893).

The cardinal reason for the success of an individual is to quote Swamiji himself,” Truth, purity and unselfishness—wherever these are present, there is no power below or the above the sun to crush the possessor thereof. Equipped with these one individual is able to face the whole universe in opposition. I have experienced even in my insignificant life that good motives, sincerity and infinite love can conquer the world. One single soul possessed of these virtues can destroy the dark designs of millions of hypocrites and brutes “After his maiden Chicago address when Swamiji stepped out he was mobbed and besieged by hundreds of women eager to touch him and an eye- witness Mrs.S.K.Blodgett quipped ,” Well, my lad, if you can resist that onslaught you are indeed a God!” In fact it was the purity of the Swamiji that safeguarded him in those slippery moments in which any man of wavering mind would have succumbed easily. It was his Tapas at the feet of Guru Maharaj which shielded him and made him speak with authority great Truths in a strange land amidst carping criticisms even from our own delegates like Mazumdar. His words made other religions self-introspect and remove complacency.

It was a rude shock for other theologians to receive from an unknown sannyasin, representing a religion not much heard of, the perception of Universality of all religions and the sense of Oneness through his two elegant and illustrative examples from Vedic literature-“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 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.”

If the true spirit of these two Vedic verses is grappled with by the world, it would be a death knell to the sectarianism which has drenched this earth with human blood, Swamiji subsequently suggests in his talk. Other delegates though steeply immersed in their own tenets and used to thrive on the credulity of the naïve followers could not but accept the all inclusive and all embracing spiritual solution of the Swamiji which was the unfailing remedy for the sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant fanaticism. Hobson's choice, of course.

Sticking to the spirit of the Parliament

Swamiji declared”...we accept all religions as true”-a bold statement which no other delegate representing any other religion dared to tell. The tone of his talk went well with the objectives of the Parliament which targeted to “promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of different faiths...”He reminded the world delegates about the tolerance and universal acceptance of our country and religion by readily sheltering the refugees of other nations and faith when they were driven out. The perception of Oneness which Vedanta promotes is the right cure for all the fanatical and sectarian bloodshed, he reiterated.

The maiden address was the base which made the Swamiji suggest later a Universal Religion wherein one can find a grand synthesis of the different facets of the same Truth enumerated by various religions. In this connection Swamiji affirms that much, much before Akbar's noble attempt of bringing together under one umbrella representatives of various religions, Emperor Asoka patronized Buddhism ,a definite fulfillment of Hinduism, which was universal and Vedantic in its outlook. Though Akbar's was an abortive attempt which Swamiji calls a mere “Parlour meeting” and Asoka's was a grand success to propagate an all-embracing religion, both brought great laurels to Mother Bharath.

Swamiji's eloquent English

Guru Maharaj's hard earned Spiritual treasure for decades handed over to Swami Vivekananda reached world - humanity because of English language through his maiden address here. It is ironical that Swamiji who was reluctant to learn English initially became an adept in this language and he deftly packed his powerful thoughts in English which amazed many natives even.

Plato defines Rhetoric as the "art of enchanting the soul." No wonder Swamiji's rhetorical speech won the heart of every one. He freely employs Parallelism, Personification and Symploce which combines both Anaphora and Epistrophe to make his talk powerful.

Swamiji was the crowd-puller of the parliament and deliberately the organizers of the Parliament made him speak last in order to keep the audience till the end. It was his English which elegantly clothed our ancient wisdom that mesmerized the people.

Outcome of the address

- Hinduism was adorned with a new dignity which world thinkers began to notice with amazement.
- Also, in this initial address Swamiji hinted an awakening call to the ritual-ridden Hindus to move towards an advanced spiritual status. The boundless possibilities in Hinduism to reach Oneness were revealed.
- He writes to Alasinga Perumal about the emotions which tossed him up and down "...Of course my heart was fluttering and my tongue nearly dried up; I was nervous, and could not venture to speak in the morning. Mazoomdar made a nice speech – Chakravarti a nicer one, and they were much applauded. They were all prepared and came with ready-made speeches. I was a fool and had none, but bowed down to Devi Saraswati and stepped up, and Dr. Barrows introduced me. I made a short speech, ...and when it was over, I sat down almost exhausted with emotion." Swamiji's outspoken attitude by admitting stage fright emboldens any ordinary man committed to a noble mission that if he musters up his courage and knowledge at times of crisis will achieve tremendous success, pinning his absolute faith in God Almighty.
- The tumultuous recognition he received after this address paved the way for earning dollars ranging from 30 to 87 per lecture which he preserved meticulously for his social work at our Motherland.
- This noble son of Mother Bharath humbly submits his grand victory at the feet of his beloved nation and our ancient order of Monks, without attributing any credit to himself or his Guru.

At the end of his speech he was totally exhausted with emotion only to rise again with renewed energy to read his celebrated paper on "Hinduism" a few days later.