

VIVEKANANDA : THE GREAT JOURNEY TO THE WEST



This journey was indeed an astonishing adventure. The young Swami went into it at random with his eyes shut. He had heard vaguely of a Parliament of Religions to be opened some day somewhere in America; and he had decided to go to it, although neither he, nor his disciples, not his Indian friends, students, pundits, ministers or Maharajas, had taken any trouble to find out about it. He knew nothing, neither the exact date nor the conditions of admission. He did not take a single credential with him. He went straight ahead with complete assurance, as if it was enough for him to present himself at the right time—God’s time. And although the Maharaja of Khetri had taken his ticket on the boat for him, and despite his protests had provided him with a beautiful robe that was to fascinate American idlers no less than his eloquence, neither he nor anybody else had considered the climatic conditions and customs; he froze on the boat when he arrived in Canada in his costume of Indian pomp and ceremony.

He left Bombay now Mumbai on 31 May 1893, and went by way of Ceylon, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, and then visited Canton and Nagasaki. Thence he went by land to Yokohama, seeking Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo. Everywhere, both in China and Japan, his attention was attracted by all that might confirm his hypothesis—his conviction—alike of the religious influence of ancient India over the Empires of the Far East, and of the spiritual unity of Asia. At the same time the thought of the ills from which his country was suffering never left him; and the sight of the progress achieved by Japan reopened the wound.

He went from Yokohama to Vancouver; thence by train he found himself towards the middle of July in a state of bewilderment at Chicago. The whole way was strewn with his feathers, for he was a marked prey for the fleecer: he could be seen from afar! At first like a great child he wandered, gazing, mouth agape, in the world’s fair, the Universal Exposition of Chicago. Everything was new to him and both surprised and stupefied him. He had never imagined the power, the riches, the inventive genius of this Western world. Being of a stronger vitality and more sensitive to the appeal of force, than a Tagore or a Gandhi who were oppressed by the frenzy of movement and noise, by the whole European–American (especially American) mechanism, Vivekananda was at his ease in it at least at first; he succumbed to its exciting intoxication, and his first feeling was of juvenile acceptance; his admiration knew no bounds. For twelve days he filled his eager eyes with this new world. A few days after his arrival in Chicago he bethought himself to go to the Information Bureau of the Exposition. . . . What a

shock! He discovered that the Parliament did not open until after the first week of September—and that it was too late for the registration of delegates—moreover, that no registration would be accepted without official references. He had none; he was unknown, without credentials from any recognised group; and his purse was nearly empty; it would not allow him to wait until the opening of the Congress. . . . He was overwhelmed. He cabled to his friends in Madras for help and applied to an official religious society that it might make him a grant. But official societies do not forgive independence. The chief of the society sent this reply:

‘Let the devil die of cold!’

The devil neither died nor gave up! He threw himself upon fate, and instead of hoarding in inaction the few dollars remaining to him, he spent them in visiting Boston. Fate helped him. Fate always helps those who know how to help themselves. Vivekananda never passed anywhere unnoticed, but fascinated even while he was unknown. In the Boston train his appearance and conversation struck a fellow traveler, a rich Massachusetts lady, who questioned him and then interested herself in him, invited him to her house, and introduced him to the Hellenist, J. H. Wright, a professor at Harvard; the latter was at once struck by the genius of this young Hindu and put himself entirely at his disposal; he insisted that Vivekananda should represent Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions, and wrote to the President of the Committee. He offered the penniless pilgrim a railway ticket to Chicago, and letters of recommendation to the Committee for funding lodgings. In short, all his difficulties were removed.

Vivekananda returned to Chicago. The train arrived late; and the dazed young man, who had lost the address of the Committee, did not know where to go. Nobody would deign to inform a coloured man. He saw a big empty box in a corner of the station, and slept in it. In the morning he went to discover the way, begging from door to door as a *sannyasin*. But he was in a city that knows, Panurge-like, a thousand and one ways of making money—except one, the way of St Francis, the vagrancy of God. He was rudely dismissed from some of the houses. At others he was insulted by the servants. At still others, the door was slammed in his face. After having wandered for a long time, he sat down exhausted in the street. He was remarked from a window opposite and asked whether he were not a delegate to the Parliament of Religions. He was invited in; and once more fate found for him one who was later numbered among his most faithful American followers. When he had rested he was taken to the Parliament. There he was gladly accepted as a delegate and found himself lodged with the other Oriental delegates to the Parliament.

His adventurous journey, which had almost ended disastrously, brought him on this occasion into port, but not for rest. Action called him, for now that fate had done its worst, it had to give place to resolution! The unknown of yesterday, the beggar, the man despised for his colour by a mob, wherein the dregs of more than half a dozen of the peoples of the world meet—at the first glance was to impose his sovereign genius.

On Monday, 11 September 1893, the first session of the Parliament was opened. In the centre sat Cardinal Gibbons. Round him to left and right were grouped the Oriental delegates Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, the chief of the Brahma Samaj, an old friend of Vivekananda, representing the Indian thesists together with Nagarkar of Bombay; Dharmapala, representing the Buddhists of Ceylon; Gandhi representing the Jains; Chakravarti, representing with Annie Besant the Theosophical Society. But amongst them all it was the young man who represented nothing—and everything—the man belonging to no sect, but rather to India as a whole, who drew the glance of the assembled thousands. His fascinating face, his noble stature, and the gorgeous apparel, which heightened the effect of this apparition from a legendary world, hid his own emotion. He made no secret of it. It was the first time that he had had to speak before such an assembly; and as the delegates, presented one by one, had to announce themselves in public in a brief harangue, Vivekananda let his turn go by hour after hour until the end of the day.

But then his speech was like a tongue of flame. Among the grey wastes of cold dissertation it fired the souls of the listening throng. Hardly had he pronounced the very simple opening words, ‘Sisters and brothers of America...’ then hundreds arose in their seats and applauded. He wondered whether it could really be he they were applauding. He was certainly the first to cast off the formalism of the Congress and to speak to the masses in the language for which they were waiting. Silence fell again. He greeted the youngest of the nations in the name of the most ancient monastic order in the world—the Vedic order of *sannyasins*. He presented Hinduism as the mother of religions, who had taught them the double precept:

‘Accept and understand one another!’

He quoted two beautiful passages from the sacred books:

‘Whoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him.’

‘All men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.’

Each of the other orators had spoken of his God, of the God of his sect. He—he alone—spoke of all their Gods, and embraced them all in the Universal Being. It was the breath of Ramakrishna, breaking down the barriers through the

mouth of his great disciple. The Parliament of Religions gave the young orator an ovation.

- **Romain Rolland**

About the Essay

The given extract is taken from *Life of Vivekananda*. It discusses with vividness and sensitivity Vivekananda's first journey to America to attend the Parliament of Religions.

Romain Rolland is a great writer from France who has great respect and regard for Indian Culture and Philosophy; he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1915.

GLOSSARY

credential	: letter of introduction
eloquence	: fluent, forcible and apt use of language
hypothesis	: starting point for investigation or enquiry; a supposition
agape	: open-mouthed with wonder or expectation
exposition	: setting forth; commentary
succumbed	: to be overcome
juvenile	: youthful
deign	: condescend
vagrancy	: wandering
resolution	: strong decision
dregs	: worthless part; sediment
sovereign	: supreme
theists	: those who believe in God's existence
sect	: group of people who have agreed on religious doctrine
apparition	: appearance of a supernatural being
dissertation	: discourse
formalism	: concerned with form

ovation : spontaneous applause; enthusiastic reception

Activity 1: COMPREHENSION

A. Tick the correct alternative:

- 1) Where did Swami Vivekanand represent India as a delegate?
 - a) Chicago, Parliament of small Religions
 - b) Europe, Parliament of World Peace
 - c) Chicago, Parliament of World Religions
 - d) America, Parliament of Peace

- 2) When was the Parliament of World Religions, Chicago held?
 - a) September 11, 1863
 - b) September 11, 1893
 - c) September 11, 1905
 - d) September 11, 1906

- 3) How did Swami Vivekanand address the delegates?
 - a) My Dear friends
 - b) Ladies and Gentlemen
 - c) Sisters and Brothers of America
 - d) My Dear countrymen

B. Answer the following questions in not more than 30-40 words each:

- 1) What aspects of Vivekananda's character are revealed in his 'Journey to the West'?
- 2) How does Rolland depict the journey as an astonishing adventure?
- 3) How has Vivekananda represented Hinduism in the Parliament of World Religions, Chicago?
- 4) When was the first session of the Parliament of World Religions, Chicago opened? Who from India represented the Parliament?
- 5) Who was J.H. Wright? How is he associated with Vivekananda?
- 6) How the official religious society treated Vivekananda's application for help?

C. Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each:

- 1) How does Rolland depicts the western world? What were Vivekananda's reactions?
- 2) How was Vivekananda different from others in his address? What was the reaction to his speech?

E. Say whether the following sentences are True or False. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for false in the bracket:

- 1) Maharaja of Jaipur had taken Swamiji's ticket on the boat for him. []
- 2) J.H. Wright offered Swamiji a railway ticket to Chicago. []
- 3) On Monday, 11 September, 1893, the first session of the Parliament opened. []
- 4) Swamiji was the disciple of Ramakrishna. []

Activity 2: VOCABULARY

A. Construct one sentence each using the following pair of words in such a way so that the difference of meaning is clear.

- 1) a) astonishing
b) surprising
- 2) a) adventure
b) enterprise
- 3) a) credential
b) credit
- 4) a) climate
b) environment
- 5) a) costume
b) clothes
- 6) a) delegates
b) representatives
- 7) a) recommendation
b) advocacy
- 8) a) legendry
b) mythological

B. The words given below are the members of the root 'Juvenile'. Make one sentence each on these words so that their meaning is clear.

- 1) Juvenile
- 2) Juvenile Court
- 3) Juvenile delinquent
- 4) Juvenilia

Activity 3: GRAMMAR

Future time

One way of marking future activity is by using 'will' or 'shall', together with the stem form of a verb. Look at the following example-

The match *will begin* at 9.30 tomorrow morning.

I *shall write* to him next week.

Reference to future time is also indicated by using 'be + going to' together with the stem form of a verb. For example:

I *am going to buy* a new scooter next week.

Note that in this sentence 'going to' does not indicate physical movement. There is a difference between 'I am going to Jaipur tomorrow' (where 'going to' indicates physical movement) and 'I am going to write a book next year.' The use of 'going to' here shows that someone intends to do something in the future or that a future action has been planned.

Finally, we can refer to future time by using the simple present tense form of the verb. For example:

The UN secretary general *visits* India and Pakistan next month.

The use of the simple present suggests that the action or event which is going to take place in the future is part of a programme which has already been finalised and is unlikely to be changed.

Compare the sentences below to be clear on the four ways of referring to future time.

Hema Malini *will perform* at the Guruvayoor dance festival next week.

Hema Malini *is going to perform* at the Guruvayoor dance festival next week.

Hema Malini *is performing* at the Guruvayoor dance festival next week.

Hema Malini *performs* at the Guruvayoor dance festival next week.

We can show action in progress in the future by using the progressive (*~ing*) forms of verbs together with 'will + be'. For example:

At 6.00 p.m. tomorrow, I *will be speaking* to some students.

When the boys meet after ten years, all of them *will be working*.

Raju *will be running* the family business by the time her brother leaves college.

Look at the following sentences-

Our train reaches Chennai at 09:30 AM tomorrow. All the offices will have opened by then.

The sentence tells us about two events – (a) The train reaching Chennai and (b) the offices opening – both of which are expected to happen in the future. The use

of future perfect form 'will have opened' indicates that event (b) will happen at or earlier time in the future than event (a).

Future perfect progressive

The future perfect progressive form of the verb is used to express a special situation and, therefore, we do not commonly use it in speech or writing. Look at the sentence given below:

By 2020, Bala *will have been running* the school for ten years.

When I see you next, you *will have been working* at S. M. Pharma for ten months.

In the sentences above, the verb appears in the future perfect progressive form 'will+have+been+participle'. This form is used when the action indicated by the verb is considered from a point of time in the future, and it is seen as having begun at some earlier point and as continuing up to the future time referred to.

Activity 4: SPEECH ACTIVITY

“Life and message of Swami Vivekananda are a source of great inspiration to many in their individual as well as collective life.”

Discuss amongst groups Swami Vivekananda as a prophet of religion and spirituality to the mankind.

Activity 5: COMPOSITION

- 1) India claims to have achieved strides of success. Nobody, however, can deny the fact that this progress has added to the blots on India's forehead. Can you recount these blots? Also suggest how these blots can be overcome.
- 2) “The teachings of Ramkrishna Paramhans and Swami Vivekananda are exemplary for the whole world.” In the light of this statement, suggest ways to incorporate their teachings in our curriculum.