



SPECIAL FEATURE

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA A HINDU MONK AND PHILOSOPHER

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Early Life

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was born **Narendranath Dutta**, into an aristocratic Bengali family of Calcutta, on January 12, 1863 on **Makara Sankranti**. He was one of eight children of Vishwanath Dutta and Bhuvaneshwari. His father was a very successful attorney and had considerable influence in the society. His mother had a strong and god-fearing mind and she had a great impact on her son. Narendranath was interested in spirituality from a young age and used to meditate before the images of deities such as **Shiva, Rama, Sita, and Hanuman**. He was fascinated by wandering ascetics and monks. Narendra was naughty and restless as a child, and his parents often had difficulty controlling him.



His mother said: *'I prayed to Shiva for a son and he has sent me one of his demons'*.

Education

Narendranath, as a young boy displayed sharp intellect. His mischievous nature belied his interest in music, both vocal and instrumental. He also excelled in his studies. He started his studies at the Metropolitan institution and later went to the Presidency College in Calcutta. By the time he graduated from the college, he had acquired a vast knowledge on different subjects. He was active in sports, gymnastics, wrestling and body building. He was an avid reader and read up on almost everything under the sun. **William Hastie** (Principal of Christian College, Calcutta, from where Narendranath graduated) wrote: *'Narendra is really a genius. I have travelled far and wide but I have never come across a lad of his talents and possibilities, even in German universities, among philosophical students. He is bound to make his mark in life'*. He was known for his prodigious memory and the ability at speed reading. He perused the Hindu scriptures like the **Bhagavad Gita** and the **Upanishads** on one hand, while on the other, he studied western philosophy, history and spirituality by David Hume, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Herbert Spencer.

Spiritual Crisis and Relationship with Sri Ramakrishna

His well-studied knowledge led him to question the existence of God and for some time he believed



in Agnosticism. Yet he could not completely ignore the existence of a Supreme Being. He became associated with the **Brahma Samaj** which recognized one God, unlike the idol-worshipping, superstition-ridden Hinduism. A host of philosophical questions regarding the existence of God, that were agitat-

ing his mind, remained unanswered. During this period of spiritual crisis, Narendranath first heard about Sri Ramakrishna from **William Hastie**, the Principal of the Scottish Church College.

Earlier, to satisfy his intellectual quest for God, Narendranath visited prominent spiritual leaders from all religions, asking them a single question: *'have you seen God?'* Each time, he came away without a satisfying answer. He put forward the same question to Sri Ramakrishna at his residence in Dakshineswar Kali Temple compounds. Without a moment's hesitation, Sri Ramakrishna replied: *'Yes, I have. I see God as clearly as I see you, only in much deeper sense. God can be seen. One can talk to him. But who cares for God? People shed torrents of tears for their wives, children, wealth, and property, but who weeps for the vision of God? If one cries sincerely for God, one can surely see Him'*. For the first time, he was face to face with a man who asserted that he had seen God. For the first time, in fact, he was hearing that God could be seen. He could feel that Ramakrishna's words were uttered from the depths of an inner experience. They could not be doubted.

On one occasion, Sri Ramakrishna proposed to transfer to Narendranath, many of the spiritual powers that he had acquired as a result of his ascetic disciplines and visions of God. Narendranath had no doubt concerning the Master's possessing such powers. He asked if they would help him to realize God. Sri Ramakrishna replied in the negative but added that they might assist him in his future work as a spiritual teacher. *'Let me realize God first'* said Narendranath, and then I shall perhaps know whether



or not I want supernatural powers. *'If I accept them now, I may forget God, make selfish use of them, and thus come to grief'*. Sri Ramakrishna was highly pleased to see his chief disciple's single-minded devotion.

He begged his Master to teach him meditation and Sri Ramakrishna's reply was a source of comfort and strength. The Master said: 'God listens to our sincere prayers. I can swear that you can see God and talk with Him as intensely as you see me and talk with me. You can hear His words and feel His touch'. Further the Master declared: *'You may not believe in divine forms, but if you believe in an Ultimate Reality who is the Regulator of the universe, you can pray to Him thus: 'O God, I do not know Thee. Be gracious to reveal to me Thy real nature. He will certainly listen to you if your prayer is sincere'*. That day marked the complete spiritual awakening of Narendranath and he found himself drawn to an ascetic way of life.

Life of a Monk

During the middle of 1885, Sri Ramakrishna, who had been suffering from throat cancer, fell seriously ill. So, in September of 1885, Sri Ramakrishna was moved to Shyampukur in Calcutta and a few months later Narendranath took a rented villa at Cossipore. Here, he formed a group of young people who were

ardent followers of Sri Ramakrishna and together, they nursed their Guru with devoted care. On August 16, 1886, Sri Ramakrishna gave up his mortal body.

After the death of Sri Ramakrishna, about fifteen of his disciples including Narendranath began to live together in a dilapidated building in Baranagar in North Calcutta, which he named **Ramakrishna Mutt**, the monastic order of Sri Ramakrishna. Here, in 1887, they formally renounced all ties to the world and took vows of monkhood. The brotherhood rechristened themselves and Narendranath emerged as **Swami Vivekananda**, the *bliss of discerning wisdom*.

The brotherhood lived off on alms donated voluntarily by patrons during holy begging, performed yoga and meditation. Vivekananda left the Mutt in 1886 and went on a tour of India on foot. He travelled the length and breadth of the country, absorbing much of the social, cultural and religious aspects of the people he came in contact with. He witnessed the adversities of life that the common people faced, their ailments and vowed to dedicate his life to bring relief to these sufferings.

At the World Parliament of Religions

During the course of his wanderings, he came to know of the World Parliament of Religions being held in Chicago, in 1893. He was keen to attend this meeting, to represent India, Hinduism and his Guru Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy. He found assertion of his wishes while he was meditating on the rocks of Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India.

The Swami was encouraged by **Professor Wright** to represent Hinduism in the Parliament of Religions, since that was the only-way he could be introduced to the nation at large. When he announced, however, that he had no credentials, the professor replied, *'To ask you, Swami, for your credentials is like asking the sun about its right to shine.'* He wrote about the Swami to a number of important people connected with the Parliament, especially to the chairman of the committee on selection of delegates, who was one of his friends, and said, *'Here is a man more learned than all our learned professors put together'*. Professor Wright bought the Swami railroad ticket for Chicago. On September 11, 1893, the World Parliament Religion sessions started and the delegates arose, one by one, and read prepared speeches, but the **Hindu Sannyasin** was totally unprepared. He had never before addressed such an assembly. When he was asked to give his message, he was seized with stage-fright, and requested the chairman to call on him a little later. Several times he postponed the summons. As he admitted later: *'Of course my heart was fluttering and my tongue nearly dried up. I was so nervous that I could not venture to speak in the morning session.'* At last, he came to the rostrum and Dr. Barrows introduced him. Bowing to **Goddess Saraswati**, the Goddess of Wisdom, he addressed the audience as *'Sisters and Brothers of America it fills my heart with joy unspeakable in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us'*. Instantly, thousands arose in their seats and gave him loud applause. They were deeply moved to see, at last, a man who discarded formal words and spoke to them with the natural and candid warmth of a brother. It took a full two minutes before the tumult subsided, and the Swami began his speech by thanking the youngest of the nations in the name of the most ancient monastic order in the world, the Vedic order of sannyasins. The keynote of his address was universal toleration and acceptance. He told the audience how India, even in olden times, had given shelter to the religious refugees of other lands, for instance, the Israelites and the Zoroastrians and he quoted from the scriptures the following two passages revealing the Hindu spirit of toleration: *'As differ-*

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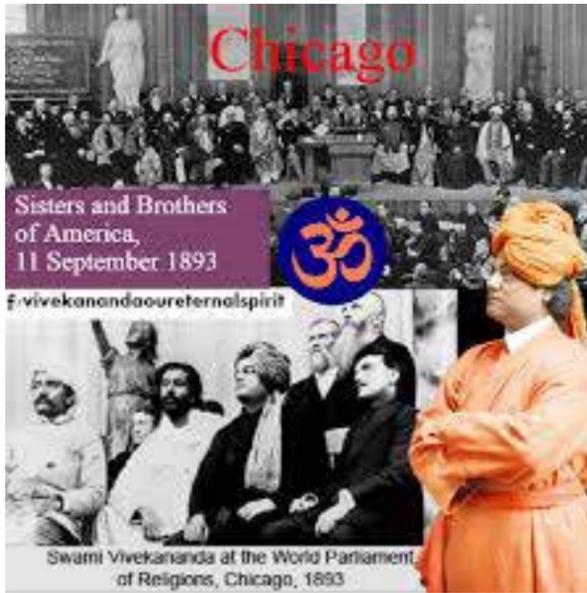


ent streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee. Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him. All men are struggling through many paths which in the end lead to Me'. In conclusion he pleaded for the quick termination of sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism. The response was deafening applause. It appeared that the whole audience had been patiently awaiting this message of religious harmony. A Jewish intellectual remarked to the press, years later, that after hearing Vivekananda he realized for the first time that his own religion, Judaism, was true, and that the Swami had addressed his words on behalf of not only his religion, but all religions of the world. Whereas every one of the other delegates had spoken for his own ideal or his own sect, the Swami had spoken about God, who, as the ultimate goal of all faiths, is their innermost essence. He had learnt that truth at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna, who had taught incessantly, from his direct experience, that all religions are but so many paths to reach the same goal. The Swami gave utterance to the yearning of the modern world to break down the barriers of caste, colour, and creed and to fuse all people into one humanity.

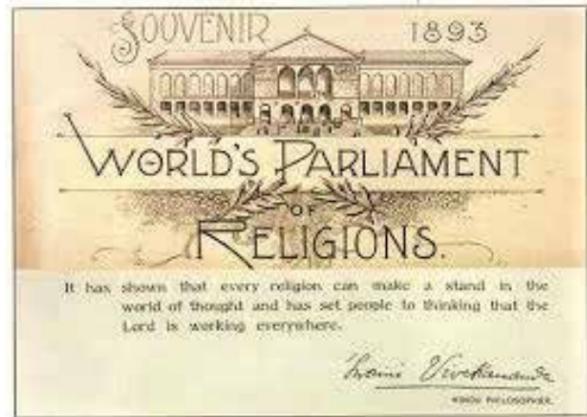
In the final session of the Parliament, Swami Vivekananda said in the conclusion of his speech: *'The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor is a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according 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'*. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him 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'*.



The young, unknown monk of India was transformed overnight into an outstanding figure of the religious world. From obscurity he leapt to fame. His life-size portraits were posted in the streets of Chicago, with words *'The Monk Vivekananda'* written beneath them and many passers-by would stop to do reverence with bowed heads. Dr. J.H. Barrows, Chairman of the General Committee of the Parliament of Religions, said: *'Swami Vivekananda exercised a wonderful influence over his auditors,'* and Mr. Merwin-Marie Snell stated, more enthusiastically: *'By far the most important and typical representative of Hinduism was Swami Vivekananda, who, in fact, was beyond question the most popular and influential man in the Parliament....He was received with greater enthusiasm than any other speaker'*. Christian or pagan. The people thronged about him wherever he went and hung with eagerness on his every word". The most rigid of orthodox Christians say of him, *'He is indeed a prince among men!'* Newspapers published his speeches and they were read with warm interest all over the country. The New York Herald said: *'He 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'*. The Boston Evening Post said: *'He is a great favourite at the Parliament from the grandeur of his sentiments and his appearance as well. If he merely crosses the platform he is applauded; and this marked approval of thousands he accepts in a childlike spirit of gratifi-*



cation without a trace of conceit....At the Parliament of Religions they used to keep Vivekananda until the end of the programme to make people stay till the end of the session....*'The four thousand fanning people in the Hall of Columbus would sit smiling and expectant, waiting for an hour or two to listen to Vivekananda for fifteen-minutes'*. The chairman knew the old rule of keeping the best until the last.' It is one of the outstanding traits of Americans to draw



out the latent greatness of other people. America discovered Vivekananda and made a gift of him to India and the world. The reports of the Parliament of Religions were published in the Indian magazines and newspapers. The Swami's vindication of the Hindu faith filled with pride the hearts of his countrymen from Colombo to Almora, from Calcutta to Bombay.

Teachings and Ramakrishna Mission

Swami Vivekananda returned to India in 1897 amidst warm reception from the common and royal alike. He reached Calcutta (present Kolkata) after a series of lectures across the country and founded the Ramakrishna Mission on May 1, 1897 at Belur Mutt near Calcutta. The goals of the Ramakrishna Mission were based on the ideals of *Karma Yoga* and its primary objective was to serve the poor and distressed population of the country. The Ramakrishna Mission undertook various forms of social service like establishing and running schools, colleges and hospitals, propagation of practical tenets of Vedanta through conferences, seminars and workshops, initiating relief and rehabilitation work across the country.

His religious conscience was an amalgamation of Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa's spiritual teachings of Divine manifestation and his personal internalization of the *Advaita Vedanta Philosophy*. He directed to achieve the divinity of the soul by undertaking selfless work, worship and mental discipline. According to Swami Vivekananda, the ultimate goal is to achieve freedom of the soul and that encompasses the entirety of one's religion. Swami Vivekananda was a prominent nationalist and had the overall wel-



fare of his countrymen topmost in his mind. He urged his fellow countrymen to *'Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached'*.

Death

Swami Vivekananda had predicted that he will not live till the age of forty. On July 4, 1902, he went about his days' work at the Belur Mutt, teaching Sanskrit grammar to pupils. He retired to his room in the evening and died during meditation at around 9 PM. He is said to have attained *"Mahasamadhi"* and the great saint was cremated on the banks of river Ganga.

Legacy

The Swami one day had a symbolic dream, in which he saw Sri Ramakrishna walking into the water of the ocean and beckoning him to follow. He also heard the authoritative word 'Go!' In response to a

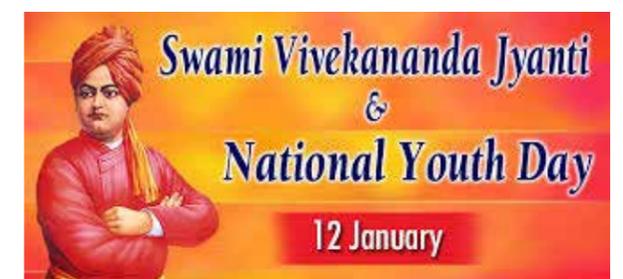


letter that he had written to Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, she gave him her blessings for the fulfilment of his desire, knowing that it was Ramakrishna's wish that he should undertake the journey to America. And now, at last, he felt sure of his call.

Swami Vivekananda's absorbing biography presents his vast knowledge of Eastern and Western culture, deep spiritual insight, brilliant conversation, broad human sympathy, and colorful personality. Swami Vivekananda, was the India's first spiritual and cultural ambassador to the West, proclaimed the universal message of Vedanta: the non-duality of the Godhead, the divinity of the soul, the oneness of existence, and the harmony of religions. *'It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body - to cast it off like a worn-out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere, until the world shall know that it is one with God'*. said Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda revealed to the world the true foundations of India's unity as a nation. He taught how a nation with such a vast diversity can be bound together by a feeling of humanity and brotherhood. *Netaji Subash Chandra Bose* once said: *'Swami-ji harmonized the East and the West, religion and science, past and present. And that is why he is great. Our countrymen have gained unprecedented self-respect, self-reliance and self-assertion from his teachings'*. Swami Vivekananda was successful in constructing a virtual bridge between the culture of the East and the West.

Sri Aurobindo regarded Vivekananda as the one who awakened India spiritually. Mahatma Gandhi counted him among the few Hindu reformers *'who have maintained this Hindu religion in a state of splendor by cutting down the dead wood of tradition'*.



Celebrations

While *National Youth Day* in India is observed on his birthday, 12 January, the day he delivered his masterful speech at the Parliament of Religions, 11 September 1893, is observed as the *World Brotherhood Day*. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports in India officially observed 2013 as the occasion in a declaration. The 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda was celebrated in India and abroad. To commemorate that day, a Five Rupees Postage Stamp was released.