SWAMI VIVEKANANDA (1863-1902)  
125TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHICAGO SPEECH

Swami Vivekananda laid stress on Ramakrishna’s teaching on the essential oneness of all religions. He promoted the Vedanta philosophy which the considered the most rational system.

The principal feature Vivekananda’s social philosophy was his insistence on the upliftment of the masses. For him, service to the poor and downtrodden was the highest religion. To organise such service, he founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897.

The history of the world is the history of a few men who had faith in themselves. That faith calls out the Divinity within. You can do anything. You fail only when you do not strive sufficiently to manifest infinite power. As soon as a man or a nation loses faith in himself or itself, death comes. Believe first in yourself, and then in God. – Swami Vivekananda.

Vivekananda was the first spiritual leader who thought beyond religious reforms. He felt that Indian masses needed secular as well as spiritual knowledge to empower them to believe in themselves. Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna mission after the name of his guru Ramakrishna Paramhamsa. Through his speeches and writings, he brought out the essence of Hindu culture and religion.

He believed in the spirit of Vedanta and the essential unity and equality of all religions. He laid stress on the removal of religious superstitions, obscurantism, and outdated social customs. He tried to remove caste rigidities, and untouchability. He motivated the people to respect women while he himself worked for women’s upliftment and education. Vivekananda attached primary importance to the removal of ignorance among the people. Vivekananda Contributed to the rise of nationalism. His nationalism was based on 4 pillars;

• Awakening of masses
• Development of physical and moral strength
• Unity based on common spiritual ideas
• Pride in ancient Indian glory

Swami Vivekananda's address at the Parliament of Religions talked about issues and subjects that are more relevant than ever.

SHELTERING THE REFUGEES

As the refugee crisis, be it Mexicans in the United States or Rohingyas in Myanmar, is worsening and countries are forced to take sides, Swami Vivekananda in his Chicago address presented an India "which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the Earth".
Swami Vivekananda in his opening address to the Parliament of Religions said, "I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny."

**TOLERANCE OF RELIGION**

With Indians debating the rise of religious intolerance in the country, Swami Vivekananda in 1893 said that he was "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," he said in Chicago.

"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 civilisation and sent whole nations to despair," said Swami Vivekananda in the speech that sounds ominous today.

**DIVERSITY OF RELIGIONS**

In Chicago, Swami Vivekananda repeatedly talked about diversity of religions and the need for peaceful existence of all religions.

In his speech 'Why We Disagree', Swami Vivekananda said, "I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christians sit in their little well and think the whole world is their well. The Muslims sit in their little well and think that is the whole world."

In his final address at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda said, "Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the other, to them I say, 'Friends, yours is an impossible hope'".

**RELEVANCE TO TODAY’S YOUTH**

Swami Vivekananda is the greatest youth icon produced by India and one that influenced millions of youth across the world. His ideas can be understood by this fourfold mantra to live a meaningful life - Physical, Social, Intellectual and Spiritual quest.

Indian youth today finds itself torn between a blind pursuit to power and material advantage in a techno-economic competitive world, and basic survival. A skewed urbanisation, declining employability and an education system focussed on skill without values have led to degradation in youth as witnessed by broken homes, intolerance, increasing crimes and juvenile delinquency. Vivekananda's spiritual humanism is much needed today.
Despite being educated, Indian youth fails to stand up against caste and gender based discrimination, superstition and religious orthodoxy at times at its own home, family, relatives. It needs to be reminded of Paramhansa's message of service to mankind is service to God.

The youth needs to rediscover Vivekananda's message of looking inward rather than being a restless soul stuck up in an incessant effort of straightening out the world, without first improving oneself. Vivekananda's 'level headed man, the calm man of good judgement' is what every organisation, whether private or public seeks today. We as today's youth need to come out of our rote based bookish learning into the life giving and character building aspects of education, which as truly the Swami said is the manifestation of perfection already in us. Thus, in the 21st century, when the youth of India are facing new problems, pushing boundaries and aspiring for a better future, thoughts of Swami Vivekananda have become more relevant.