

His going forth to America

Swami Vivekananda sailed to America on 31 May 1893 from Bombay. On his way to Bombay from Khetri of Rajasthan, he spent a night at Abu Road, where he met two of his brother disciples, Rakhhal (Swami Brahmananda) and Hari (Swami Turiyananda). Later Swami Turiyananda recounted a conversation Swamiji had with him: ‘He said, “Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion.” Then with an expression of deep sorrow on his countenance and intense emotion shaking his body, he placed his hand on his heart and added, “But my heart has expanded very much, and I have learnt to feel. Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.” His voice was choked with feeling; he could say no more. For a time profound silence reigned, and tears rolled down his cheek.’

It is against this backdrop that we must understand his going forth to America and Europe. During the initial days of his travels throughout the country, he stayed at Hathras in North India for some time as a guest of Sarat Chandra Gupta. There one day Sarat found him very sad. He asked him the reason. Swamiji said, ‘I have a great mission to fulfil and I am in despair at the smallness of my capacity. I have an injunction from my Guru to carry out this mission. It is nothing less than the regeneration of my motherland....’

His endeavours in India to goad the kings and the rich and educated Indians into the service of the masses went mostly in vain. Small bands of dedicated young men gathered round him, and he had many admirers everywhere, including Hindus, Muslims, and others. But that was not enough to shake the whole nation to her foundations and rouse her up from age-old stupor. So, he decided to go abroad.

After reaching the United States via China, Japan, and Canada, soon he had to confront many formidable odds. There was hardly any hope of speaking at the Parliament of Religions; the little amount of money he brought from India was going to be finished; animosity of some people was making things worse. At such a hard time, he wrote to his young followers of Madras, ‘Feel for the miserable and look up for help – it shall come. I have travelled twelve years with this load in my heart and this idea in my head. I have gone from door to door of the so-called rich and great. With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help.... I may perish of cold or hunger in this land, but I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed.’

At that time he was away from the expensive city of Chicago. He was staying for some time at a small township near Boston. Soon he was invited by Prof John Henry Wright of Harvard University to spend a weekend with him at village resort. After having long discussions with Swamiji, the professor ‘was so deeply impressed with the Swami that he insisted he represent Hinduism at that important gathering (the Parliament of Religions), saying, “This is the only way you can be introduced to the nation at large.”’ Representatives of many religions were to come as delegates, but none of Hinduism. Swamiji accepted the proposal.

What he taught there was the universal core of Indian philosophy and spirituality, with a modern and scientific interpretation, which is to become a factor in the civilizations of the world. He was the Ambassador of Love, sent forth by the ancient mother – India – to give her best with his life’s blood. But the wonderful gift still remains unopened in America, opined the American author of ‘The Gift Unopened’. Have we done any better here in India?

Swamiji remarked, 'India has not yet assimilated the work of Buddha. She is hypnotised by his voice, not made alive by it.' So it is with Vivekananda.

Before the Parliament of Religions started, Swamiji spoke elsewhere on 'The Mohammedan Rule in India', 'The Use of Silver in India', and some other topics before distinguished gatherings. At the Parliament of Religions, he spoke and immediately conquered all hearts. 'To the heart of this speaker,' wrote Sister Nivedita, 'none was foreign or alien. For him, there existed only Humanity and Truth.'

After working incessantly for three and a half years in the West, he came back to the motherland in 1897. That year at a public lecture in Madras he said, 'I did not go to America, as most of you know, for the Parliament of Religions, but this demon of a feeling was in me and within my soul. I travelled twelve years all over India, finding no way to work for my countrymen, and that is why I went to America. Most of you know that, who knew me then. Who cared about this Parliament of Religions? Here was my own flesh and blood sinking every day, and who cared for them? This was my first step.'