

## **Speech by the president of india, shri pranab mukherjee at the 120th anniversary of swami vivekananda's historic voyage from mumbai to the west to participate in the parliament of world religions in chicago (1893)**

Convocation Hall, University Of Mumbai, Mumbai : 31.05.2013

1. It gives me immense pleasure to be here this afternoon.
2. Some journeys in the lives of great men are destined to be transformational, both for themselves and for their people. So was it with Swami Vivekananda's voyage to Chicago 120 year ago today.
3. As it turned out, the Swami's Chicago speeches are amongst the greatest proclamations of inter-faith harmony and universal brotherhood in the history of mankind. Their relevance has increased manifold today – in a world that is far more inter-connected and inter-dependent. Harmonious co-existence among various faiths and communities is not an ideal anymore but an absolute imperative today. In his first speech in Chicago on 11th September, 1893, the Swami had a very significant message - which humanity can ignore only at its peril. I like to refer to the following words from his speech:  
  
"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. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now?"
4. Ladies and Gentlemen, in those days, the western world's understanding of India was coloured by misconceptions about this distant country and her people. It was therefore a turning point indeed, when Swami Vivekananda's powerful thoughts and the purity of his personality won the minds and hearts of a large section of the influential thinkers that he came across.
5. As Swamiji unhesitatingly appreciated the positive aspects and accomplishments of the Western Societies – and refrained from being dogmatic as he made his point, he was able to build a robust new bridge of understanding and goodwill for India. In so doing, he also opened a new dialogue between our peoples based on mutual acceptance.
6. Romain Rolland, French Nobel laureate, in his book The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel, has written: "In two words 'equilibrium' and 'synthesis' Vivekananda's constructive genius may be summed up. ....He was the personification of the harmony of all Human Energy."
7. As we pay tribute to Swami Vivekananda today, his vision and indeed his own example, should remind us today of the things that we need to do urgently and in a sustained manner – both individually as well as collectively as citizens of modern India. What are the priorities that we could take up?

8. Firstly, social reform constituted a key component of Swami Vivekananda's vision for modern India. Swamiji was uncompromisingly opposed to discrimination, deprivation and injustice on the grounds of caste, class and gender. According to him, the mismatch between the lofty ideals of Vedanta and the disgraceful apathy for the human condition in our society were simply unacceptable. Maharashtra has borne some of our nation's greatest social reformers. I would like to affirm today that although the paths of these leaders of our society may have appeared to be outwardly divergent, their goals were essentially the same. Swamiji's 150th birth anniversary celebrations should be an occasion for a constructive debate and cooperative action among the various sections striving for social reform.

9. Secondly, as the Swami believed, it is today, an urgent imperative to both improve and also expand our education system. I am confident that many of our grand Universities can reinvent themselves and regain their past glory. They urgently need to update themselves and make their curriculum and methods more relevant and result oriented. This can be achieved through a comprehensive and time-bound plan of reform.

10. Further, Government's efforts must be supplemented by the commitment of more resources by the corporate sector to development and social welfare activities.

11. However, I do believe that our foremost goal should be the revival of our proud traditions in morality, ethics and social conduct. Our nation's progress should not be hampered by the tarnishing of our national character or a weakening of the moral fibre of our society. We seem to be losing our sense of right and wrong and good and bad as we pursue our respective short-term objectives. As a result, not only is the greater public good being sacrificed, but even the private search for success and happiness is yielding short-lived, illusory and often counter-productive outcomes.

12. Therefore, to remember Swami Vivekananda is to remember his call for re-building India's national character. In particular, to remember his epoch-making voyage today is to remember his call to the youth of India to be daring, courageous, adventurous and strong — and above all, unshakably strong in their morals and ethics.

13. I firmly believe that the people of India must show the way to the world by adhering to this message of Swami Vivekananda. We have long symbolised communal peace and harmony - based on tolerance and respect for all faiths. We must continue to live up to this and set an example.

14. Ladies and Gentlemen, with these words, I sincerely thank the Ramakrishna Mission, Mumbai, for organising this commemoration and the Observer Research Foundation Mumbai for bringing out two very relevant publications on this occasion.

15. May we all be inspired by Swami Vivekananda's thoughts and words and earnestly strive to practice his ideals in our day to day lives.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.