

REVISITING THE ROOTS

POTPURRI

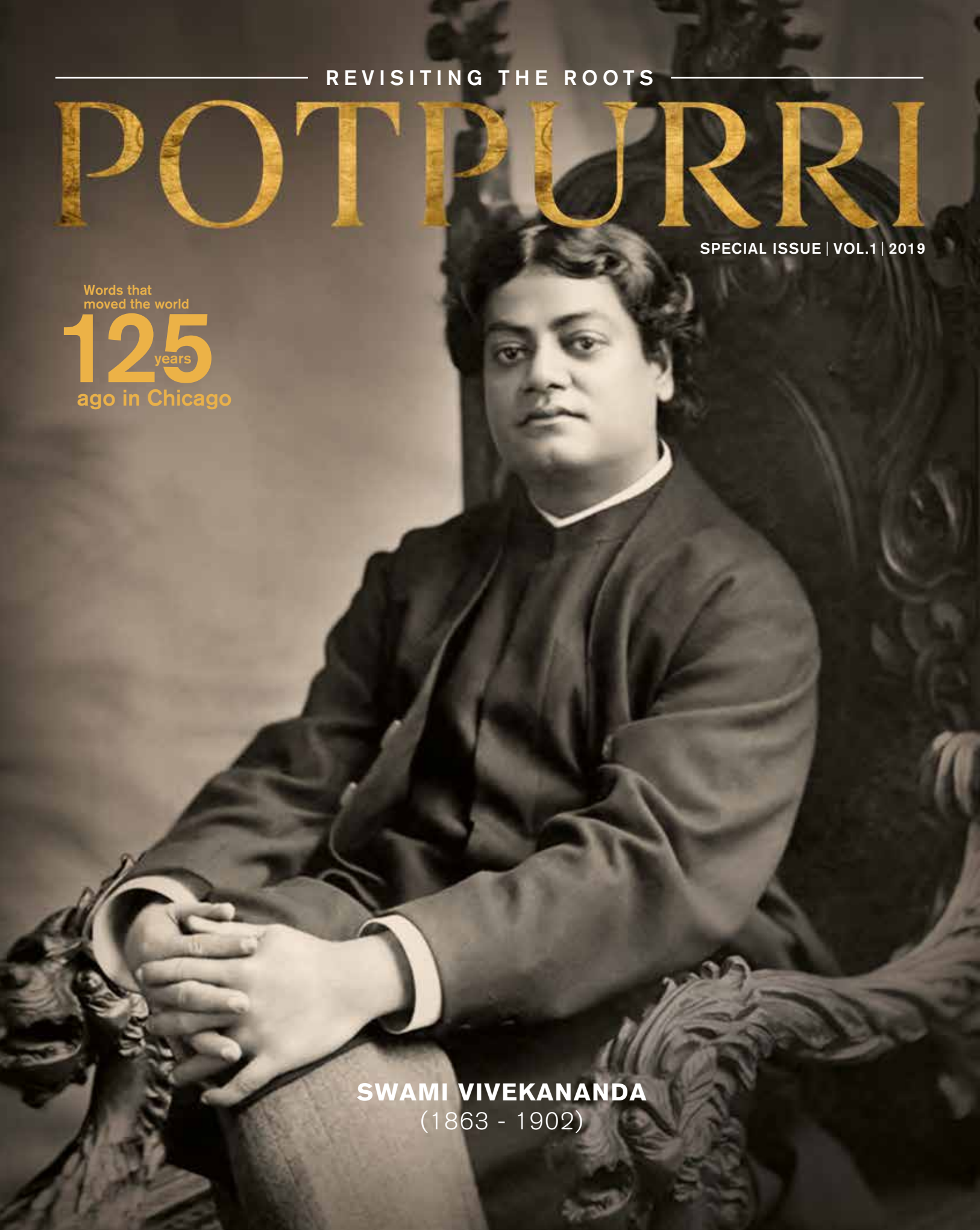
SPECIAL ISSUE | VOL.1 | 2019

Words that
moved the world

125
years

ago in Chicago

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA
(1863 - 1902)





“Take risks in your life. If you win, you can lead, if you lose, you can guide.”

Swami Vivekananda

CHAIRMAN'S NOTE



Harshavardhan Neotia
Chairman, Ambuja Neotia

Greetings and good wishes for 2019!

This special issue of Potpurri celebrates some important aspects of Swami Vivekananda's life and commemorates 125 years of his speeches at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Along with Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhiji, Swami Vivekananda's teachings have left an indelible impression on my mind. Today, his life and ideals take on fresh relevance at a time when globally we are facing divisive forces trying to wreck the world. Swamiji not only helped build a bridge between the Orient and the Occident by interpreting Hindu philosophy to the West, but he also emphasised the distinction between religion and spirituality and encouraged the youth of India to adopt a philosophy of pluralism and tolerance, combined with hard work and honesty of purpose.

I have made a humble effort to record his six speeches delivered in Chicago way back in 1893 so that a new generation can understand Swamiji's values and beliefs that have stood the test of time. Today, as the world gets divided 'into fragments by narrow, domestic walls,' Swami Vivekananda's thoughts immediately ignite our imagination because of the universality of his preachings. For the complete collection of the Chicago discourses do visit www.timelesstreasurecollection.com

May the exalted goals the dynamic savant set for humanity inspire us to follow in his footsteps and make us proud to be Indians.

Harsh Neotia

BACKSTAGE

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Harshavardhan Neotia

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Anderson Printing House Pvt. Ltd.
EN-11, Sector V, Salt Lake City, Kolkata 700 091
Phone +91 33 2357 2988 | +91 33 4006 1847 | +91 9831778971
www.andersonindia.com

CONTENT

Inner Eye Communications Pvt. Ltd.
119, Southern Avenue, Green View, 5th Floor SW, Kolkata 700 029

PUBLISHED BY

Bengal Ambuja Housing Development Limited
Vishwakarma, 86-C Topsia Road (South), Kolkata 700 046
Phone: +91 33 2285 0028 | www.ambujaneotia.com

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Potpourri is traditionally a mixture of dried petals and spices often placed in beautiful bowls to perfume a room. When the fragrance spreads, it encompasses, most magically, a medley of emotions. We have given this name our special twist and believe that the pages of Potpurri will bring for our readers interesting and diverse reading material with aplomb.

EDITOR'S LETTER



Jayabrato Chatterjee
Managing Editor

I wonder how many young Indians – especially those who never forget to celebrate Valentine's Day on 14 February – are aware of the significance of 12 January, Swami Vivekananda's birthday. Yet, over a century ago, long before communication technology promoted the idea of a global village, India had offered the world a truly global citizen.

Swamiji's philosophy propagated an inclusive, compassionate world where empathy and service to humanity would be the milestones to follow. Undertaking a whirlwind lecture tour across America, he became India's most prominent ambassador and opened the eyes of the West to the fount of our timeless Vedantic treasures. In India too he travelled across the length and breadth of the country, lecturing tirelessly on the ideas of modernity and brotherhood. Given the politics of that era and the social and economic environment, Swamiji was a true revolutionary who was speaking much ahead of his time. He ignited the minds of millions and believed that a nation built on the bedrock of education and gender equality would ultimately help to close man-made divisions of caste and creed. Swamiji lived for a short, meteoric span of four decades. But he left permanent foot-prints on the sands of time that can inspire the lives of generations to come.

For me, personally, Swami Vivekananda will always remain India's original spiritual Rock Star!

TIMELESS TREASURES

timelesstreasurecollection.com

Commemorating 125 years of Swami Vivekananda's Chicago Speech

Presented by Harshavardhan Neotia



Featuring:

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Ustad Saleem Hassan Chisti | Sourendro-Soumyojit

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AmbujaNeotia

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UNBLEMISHED LOVE

THE AMERICAN DREAM

'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. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.'

Swami Vivekananda

Sixty years after it was founded, way back in September 1893, the city of Chicago in America witnessed the most spectacular World's Columbian Exposition, an early International Trade Fair. So many people were coming to Chicago from all over the world that many smaller Congresses and Parliaments were scheduled to take advantage of this unprecedented gathering. A number of conventions were held in conjunction with the exposition, including those dealing with anthropology, labour, medicine, temperance, commerce and finance, literature, history, art, philosophy and science. One of these was the Parliament of Religions, perhaps the first attempt to create a global dialogue of faiths in the West.

The opening ceremony, held on 11 September at the World's Congress Auxiliary Building which is now The Art Institute of Chicago, was attended by 4,000 delegates. Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Confucianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Protestantism addressed the audiences over the course of two weeks, creating a historic event for the closing of the 19th century. Swami Vivekananda's thoughts immediately caught the imagination of the public because of the universality of his preaching and the exalted goals he set for man. He had begun his speech by addressing the audience as 'Sisters and Brothers of America.' The opening line was greeted by a standing ovation from a crowd of 7,000 which lasted for three entire minutes.

A view of the delegates at the Parliament of Religions, 1893





Swami Vivekananda on the platform of the Parliament of Religions

Representing India, in his discourse Swamiji stressed upon the essence of interfaith awareness and religious tolerance. Moreover, he presented the ancient teachings of India in its purest form. His elocution voiced the spirit of the Parliament and its essence of inclusion. The American press dubbed Swami Vivekananda as the 'Cyclonic Monk from India', 'the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions' and 'the most popular and influential man in the Parliament.'

The day after he delivered his historic address, The New York Critique wrote, 'Swami Vivekananda is an orator by divine right, and his strong, intelligent face in its picturesque setting of yellow and orange was hardly less interesting than those earnest words, and the rich, rhythmical utterance he gave them.' The New York Herald wrote, 'Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions.'

Swami Vivekananda and his beliefs have become even more relevant for today's society. In fact, they are the crying need of the hour, given the divisive forces that are overtaking the globe. Of the six speeches he delivered over the months, we commemorate 125 years of Swamiji's first speech in its sparkling entirety.



The Hale Residence at Chicago which Swamiji made his headquarters



Parliament of Religions was held at the Art Institute of Chicago in September, 1893

'Sisters and Brothers of America,

It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.

My thanks, also, to some of the speakers on this platform who, referring to the delegates from the Orient, have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honour of bearing to different lands the idea of toleration. I am 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. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. 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. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering remnant Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you,

“As the different 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.”

brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings: “As the different 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.”

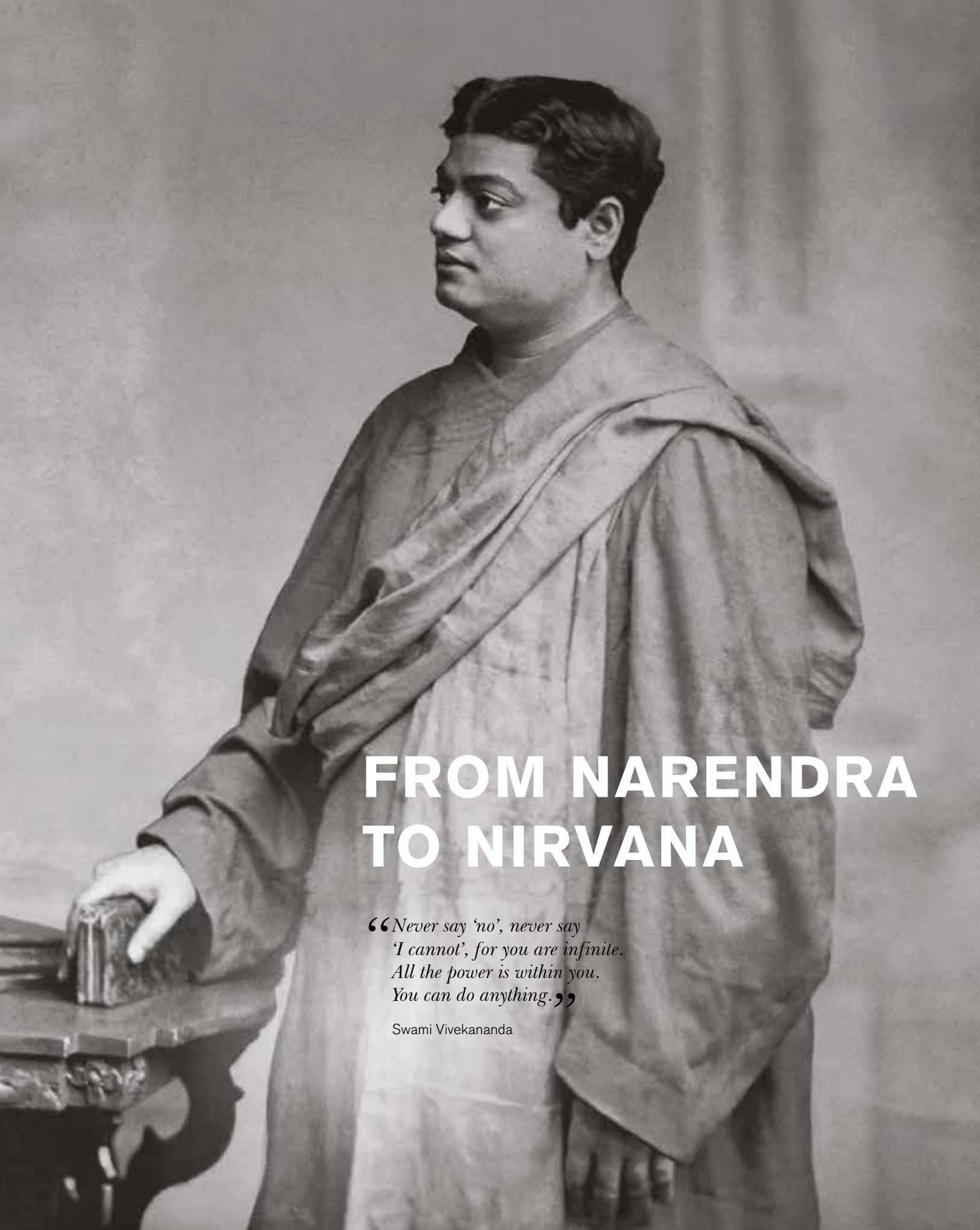
The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: “Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.” 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. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.’



East Indian group at Chicago, 1893.
Left to right: Narasimhacharya,
Lakshminarayan, Swami Vivekananda,
H. Dharmapala and Virchand Gandhi





FROM NARENDRA TO NIRVANA

*“Never say ‘no’, never say
‘I cannot’, for you are infinite.
All the power is within you.
You can do anything.”*

Swami Vivekananda

Born on 12 January 1863 in Calcutta to Bhuvaneshwari Devi, a pious housewife, and Viswanath Datta, a liberal attorney practicing at the Calcutta High Court, who knew then that the transformation of an obstreperous, naughty little boy to an outspoken savant of international reckoning would be so fascinating?

One of the eight children, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, while carrying Narendra, had prayed to Lord Shiva at Varanasi and is supposed to have had a dream in which Baba Viswanath had risen from his meditation and said that he himself would be born soon as her son. The baby arrived on the occasion of Makar Sankranti and as he grew up – lovingly nicknamed Biley by his mother – he became a natural leader in his neighbourhood, lording over a group of boys, and his companions unequivocally bowed to his decisions. An exasperated landlord once threatened the rowdy children. ‘There is a demon in the tree and he swallows naughty schoolboys before they can run away,’ he warned. But Naren was not impressed by the threat. He settled on a branch even as his mates took to their heels, waiting for several hours, but no demon appeared. So he declared that the landlord’s story was a fraud and laughed at his empty threats. Naren also loved to tease his sisters and his mischievous nature belied his interest in music, both instrumental as well as vocal. However, prompted by his pious mother, as he sat down to meditate, he became oblivious of the world around him. Not even a lizard or a snake moving nearby could disturb his concentration.



Bhuvaneshwari Devi prayed to
Lord Vireshwara Shiva for a son before the birth of Naren

Naren's father often had his clients belonging to different castes visit him at their home on Gour Mohan Mukherjee Street in the middle-class neighbourhood of Simulia in north Calcutta. The house was like an inn; the clients had breakfast and lunch there. And it was common to provide them with hookahs to smoke after meals. There were different pipes for clients of different castes. Young Naren often wondered what would happen if he smoked one of the pipes meant for those of a decidedly lower background. Finally he took the plunge although nothing untoward happened. Thus, at a very early age, he concluded that caste had no meaning. Years later, he said, 'Condemn none. If you can stretch out a helping hand, do so. If you cannot, fold your hands, bless your brothers and let them go their own way.'

By 1880, Narendranath Datta, an excellent student, had passed his Matriculation and Entrance examinations from Metropolitan Institution and joined General Assembly's Institution. By then, he was an active sportsman, an enthusiastic gymnast and a keen wrestler

who devoted many precious hours to body-building. An avid reader, he diligently perused the Hindu scriptures while also studying western philosophy, history and spirituality propounded by great philosophers like David Hume, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Herbert Spencer. Yet day by day he became restless and underwent a deep spiritual crisis. His wide-ranging knowledge led him to question the existence of God and for some time he was attracted to the theory propagated by Agnostics. But then again, he could not completely ignore the existence of a Supreme Being. Soon he became associated with Keshub Chandra Sen of the Brahma Samaj who recognised one God unlike a large majority of the idol-worshipping, superstition-ridden Hindus. Naren would visit persons renowned for their spirituality in Bengali society and ask them if they had, after all, seen God. Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father and a famous mystic, is alleged to have replied that he had not, but believed that Naren would, in the coming days, succeed in his quest. This was the time when he first heard about Sri Ramakrishna from Rev. William Hastie, the Principal of General Assembly's Institution.

Young Naren often wondered what would happen if he smoked one of the pipes meant for those of a decidedly lower background.



One day young Naren tried to taste all the smoking pipes kept for his father's clients who belonged to different castes just to check whether he became an outcast or not

Narendra's meeting with his guru was certainly pre-ordained though he initially visited him at the Kali temple in Dakshineswar with some of his friends with great reluctance. However, the minute Ramakrishna surrounded by his disciples set eyes on him, he said in a thrilled voice, 'Why have you come so late? I have been waiting for you all these days!'

Sri Ramakrishna, a priest in the temple of Goddess Kali, was no learned scholar, unlike several of Narendra's sophisticated Brahma Samaj associates. Yet he seemed visibly God-intoxicated. Narendra thought the elderly man was perhaps unabashedly crazy.

'I see God as clearly as I see you, only in a much deeper sense. One can talk to Him any time. 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.'

'Will you come again? Promise me you will,' pleaded Ramakrishna, clinging to the young neophyte's arm. Eager to escape, Naren nodded his head and fled. But a few days later, in great restlessness, he visited Dakshineswar again and asked Ramakrishna bluntly, 'Sir, have you seen God?'

'Of course I have! I see God as clearly as I see

you, only in a much deeper sense. One can talk to Him any time. 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. I can show Him to you too. But why are you yearning to see God?' replied Ramakrishna.

Narendra was astounded. For the first time he was face to face with a man who asserted that he had, indeed, seen God. He could feel that Ramakrishna's words were uttered from the depths of some unfathomable and deep experience. They could not be doubted.



The temple garden of Dakshineswar from the Ganges

“Learn everything that is good from others, but bring it in, and in your own way adsorb it; do not become others.”

Swami Vivekananda

A month passed. This time Narendra went alone to Dakshineswar. Ramakrishna was resting on a cot in his room. Pleased to see the young man with restless eyes, he made him sit on his bed and immediately went into a trance. As he put his leg on Narendra's lap, the doubting devotee forgot all manifestations of the outer world. He felt as if he were dissolving; melting into ether without the burden of his body or the misgivings swimming in his head. Once he came around, bowing down and touching his feet, he accepted Ramakrishna as his guru.

In 1884, Narendranath Datta underwent considerable financial distress due to the sudden death of his father. The burden of supporting his mother

and younger siblings now fell on his shoulders. He asked Ramakrishna to pray to the Goddess for the financial welfare of his family. On Ramakrishna's

On Ramakrishna's suggestion he went to the temple to pray himself. But once he faced Ma Kali he was so overwhelmed that instead of soliciting for money and wealth, he asked for 'Vivek' or Conscience and 'Vairagya' or Reclusion.

suggestion he went to the temple to pray himself. But once he faced Ma Kali he was so overwhelmed that instead of soliciting for money and wealth, he asked for 'Vivek' or Conscience and 'Vairagya' or Reclusion. That memorable day marked the complete spiritual awakening of Narendranath and he

found himself drawn to an ascetic way of life. Some years later, after much struggle, Swamiji was initiated into sannyas by Sri Ramakrishna. During his travels as a penniless ascetic his thoughts went through a miraculous revolution on reaching Kanyakumari, the southern-most tip of India.

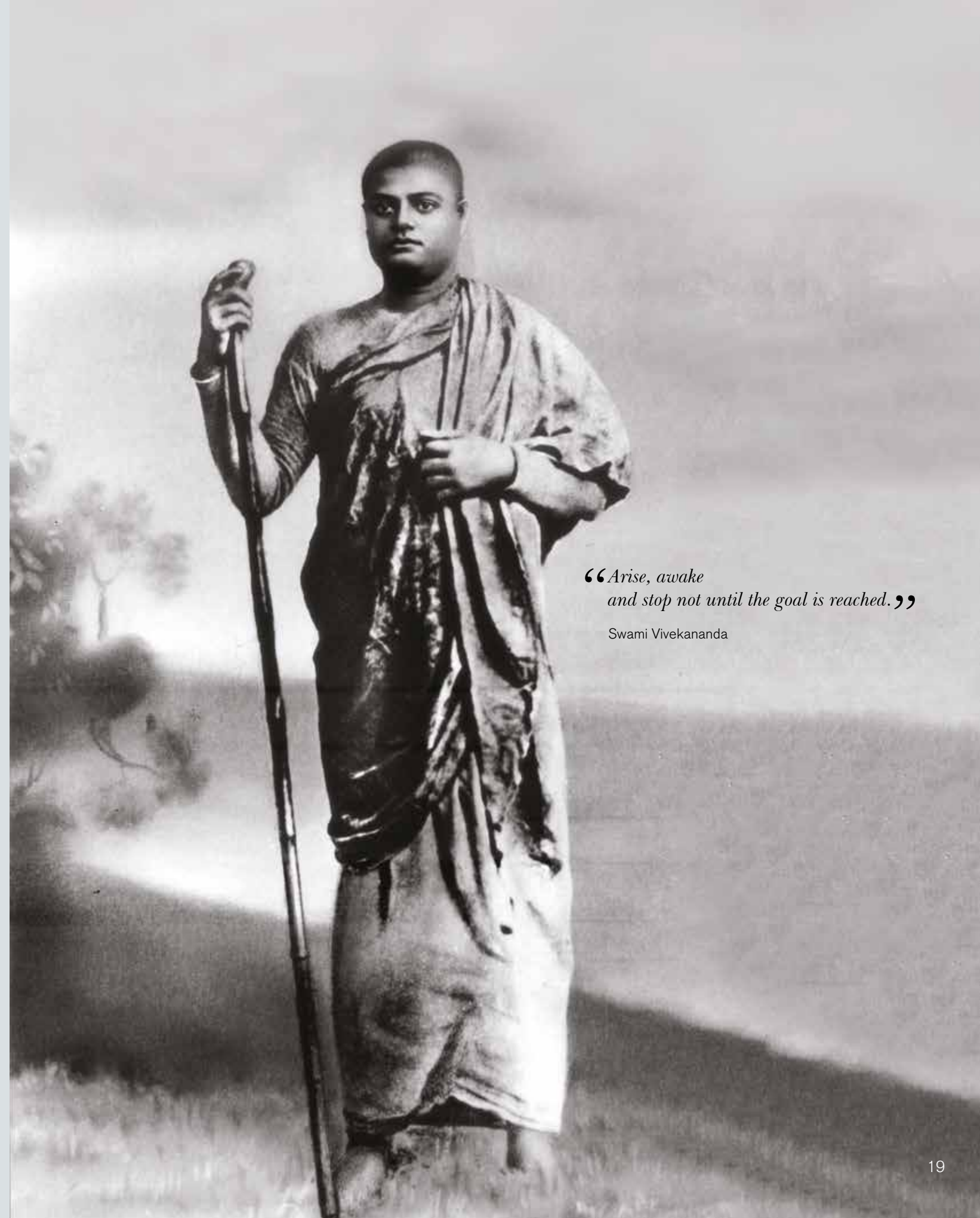


Vivekananda Rock (centre) at Kanyakumari where Swamiji spent three nights in 1892



Swami Vivekananda, 1891

It was a cold morning in December 1892. The Swami had just been to Nagercoil and then proceeded to the temple of Parvati in Kanyakumari to meditate. As he stood gazing at the sea, some two furlongs away, he noticed two large rocks washed by the sea. According to the Puranas, the larger of these boulders was supposed to have been sanctified by the blessed feet of the Divine Mother. Swamiji was seized with the desire to reach them and pray. He asked a few boatmen whether he could be ferried across. But alas, he had not a single paisa to pay for the journey.



*“Arise, awake
and stop not until the goal is reached.”*

Swami Vivekananda

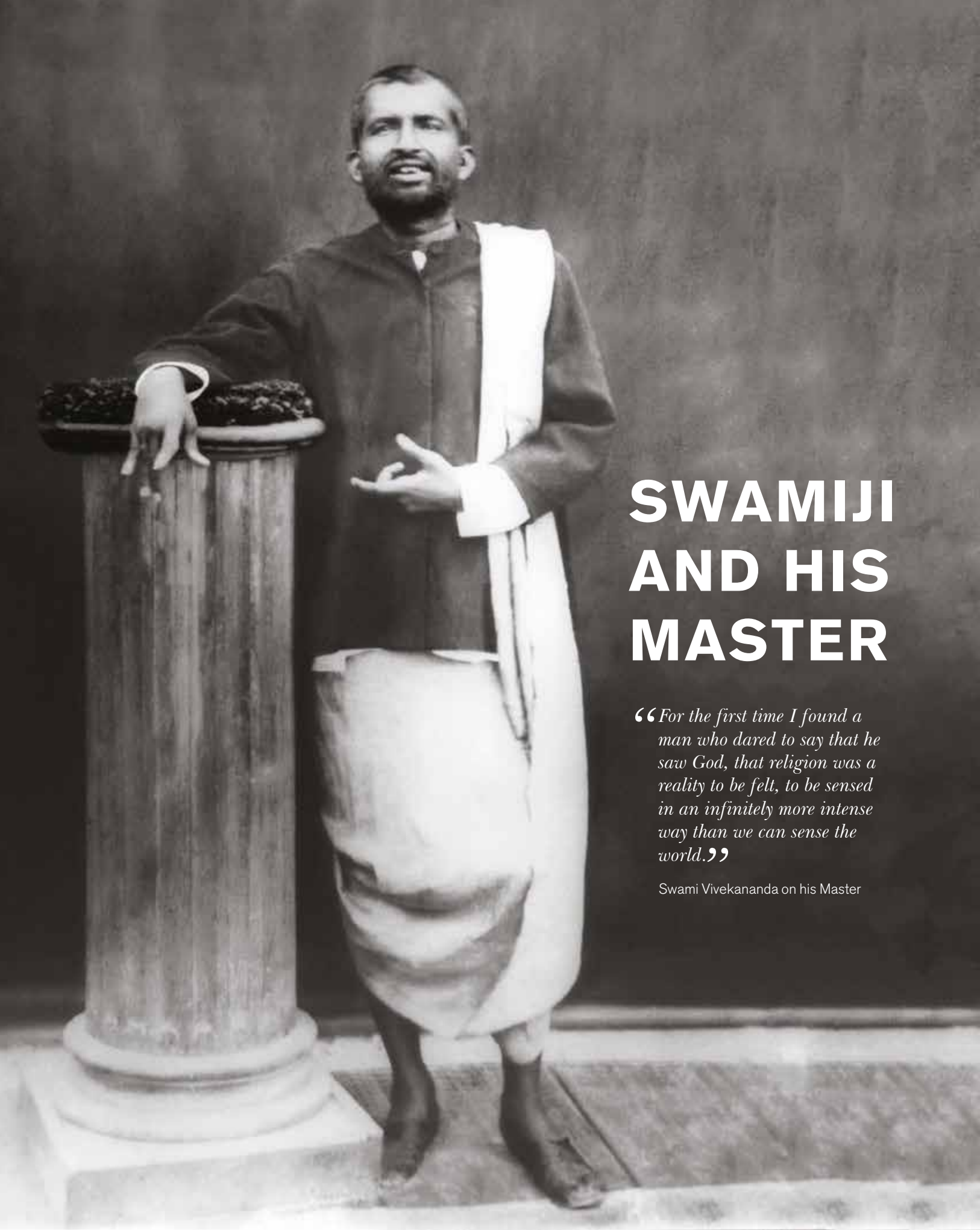


Ajit Singh, Maharaja of Khetri

What happened next was remarkable. Without much ado, Swamiji plunged into the roaring waves. The experienced boatmen screamed and warned him of the stormy waters and the sharks in the ocean. But Swamiji swam safely to the rock. And there he spent three days and three nights, with just the thrashing waves for company. Thus, sitting on the last stone of India, he passed into a spell of deep meditation and contemplated on the present and future of his country. He sought to understand the root of her problems and with the vision of a seer, at long last comprehended his mission. This was the time when he heard about the World's Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago. His friends and admirers wanted him to go. So, with funds partly collected by his Chennai disciples and partly provided by the Raja of Khetri – who also christened him Swami Vivekananda – he left for America from Mumbai on 31 May 1893.

Today, Kanyakumari has become a famous tourist spot and anyone who goes there does not miss visiting the Vivekananda Rock Memorial.





SWAMIJI AND HIS MASTER

“For the first time I found a man who dared to say that he saw God, that religion was a reality to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense way than we can sense the world.”

Swami Vivekananda on his Master

The minute Ramakrishna Paramahansa set eyes on young Narendra, he sensed in him the relentless stirrings of an earnest soul and decided to open the doors of spirituality to the noble youngster. But initially Narendra met his guru with great trepidation. Unlike the uneducated priest of Dakshineswar, young Naren came from an affluent family and was an ardent college student well-versed with Western philosophy and studying for his BA Exams. But despite being a regular member of the Brahma Samaj, much to his alarm he was realising that their religious lectures and discussions, like those of the Freemasons, were unable to quench his constant spiritual thirst.

Narendra's first pre-ordained meeting with Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa was in November 1881, at Surendra Nath Mitra's residence. Surendra Nath, a devotee of the temperamental sage of Dakshineswar, had invited him to a spiritual festival being observed at his home. Naren also happened to attend this celebration. However, the musician who had been appointed to render spiritual hymns for the occasion did not turn up. So young Narendranath, who was a talented singer, was requested to take over. Naren sang a few devotional songs and Ramakrishna was impressed by his talent. He immediately invited him to visit Dakshineswar. Naren, however, was doubtful about the priest's powers.



Swamiji's first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna in 1881



A view of Dakshineswar Temple, founded in 1855

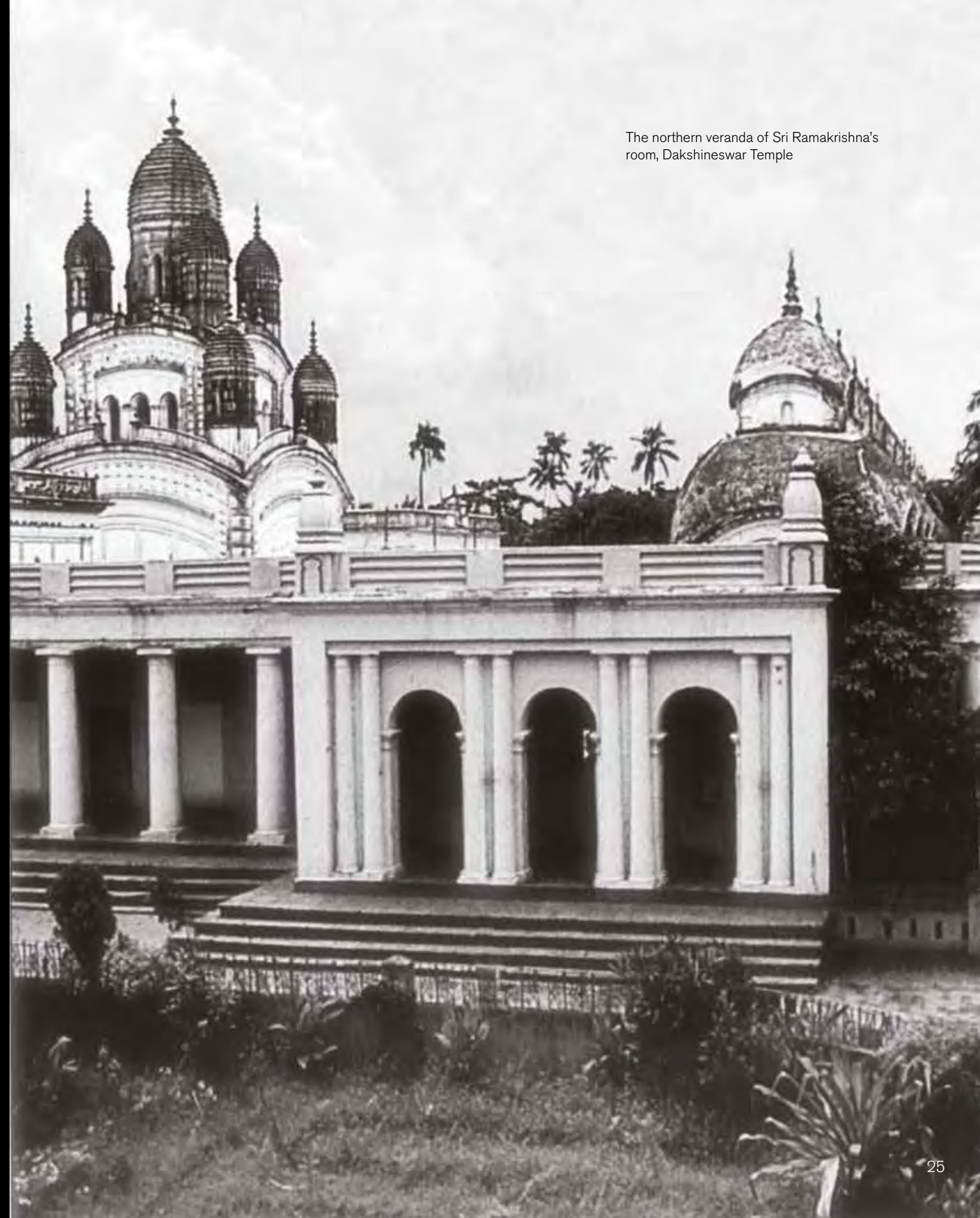
About this time Narendra's father, Viswanath Datta, was keen to get his son married and started looking for a suitable match. His maternal uncle, Ram Chandra, also felt that Naren's restlessness would be slaked once he settled into domestic life. But Narendra refused point blank to be drawn into any mundane matrimonial web. Learning about Naren's spiritual thirst, Ram Chandra told him to go to Dakshineswar and meet Ramakrishna. 'If you really want to know the truth, why are you wasting time with the Brahma Samaj?' he admonished. 'Go to Ramakrishna Paramahansa in Dakshineswar.' Narendra, however, kept hesitating till he attended one of Professor William Hastie's lectures on William Wordsworth's poem, The Excursion. The pedagogue was trying to explain to his students the meaning of the word 'trance' and suggested that they visit Dakshineswar and meet Ramakrishna to understand its full implication first-hand.

Following Ram Chandra Datta and Professor Hastie's suggestion, with a batch of fellow students Naren finally went to Dakshineswar, unsure of how events would unfold. He entered the room through the western door facing the Ganges. Immediately, Ramakrishna noticed that the young lad had no concern about his physical appearance. His hair and clothes were untidy and he seemed to have no attachment for external objects. Ramakrishna warmly welcomed Narendra and asked him to sit on a mat spread on the floor. Then the priest requested him to sing. Naren immediately broke into a devotional hymn:

'Let us go back once more, O Mind, to our proper home! Here in this foreign land why should we wander aimlessly in a stranger's guise?'



Principal of General Assembly's Institution, W.W. Hastie



The northern veranda of Sri Ramakrishna's room, Dakshineswar Temple



Sri Ramakrishna's room at Dakshineswar Temple

Ramakrishna was thrilled. Grasping Narendra's hands, he took him into the northern porch of the Kali temple, though the doubts in Naren's mind were not dispelled. With tears rolling down his cheeks, Ramakrishna said, 'Test me as the money changers test their coins. You must not believe me without testing me thoroughly.' Nevertheless, Naren initially saw Ramakrishna's ecstasies and visions as 'mere figments of imagination' and 'hallucinations.'

The defining moment of acceptance was therefore both tempestuous and prophetic.

Naren, after his initial visit to Dakshineswar, had been filled with anxiety, and this apprehension grew manifold when Ramakrishna finally told him on being questioned that he had, indeed, seen God. When Naren went to Dakshineswar again after a few weeks, another strange

experience filled him with dread. While he sat talking with the priest, Ramakrishna suddenly placed his right foot on Naren's lap, throwing the young novice into an abrupt daze. Everything around him – the room, the walls, the temple garden and the courtyard appeared to dissolve and vanish. His body seemed to lose all

‘Test me as the money changers test their coins. You must not believe me without testing me thoroughly.’

weight as he floated in thin air, suspended between reality and make-belief. In utter fright Naren cried out, 'What are you doing to me? I have my parents, brothers and sisters at home to look after!' Ramakrishna laughed and moved

his foot away. He restored the poor boy's consciousness and said, 'All right, everything will happen in due time.' Naren could not stop supposing that Ramakrishna had hypnotized him. Yet, most strangely, he could not resist the illiterate priest's attraction.



The Panchavati at Dakshineswar where Sri Ramakrishna and later his disciples practiced many spiritual disciplines

It was only after a few subsequent meetings that young Naren started to see the Master in his true light and these encounters proved to be a turning point in his life. A storm had been raging in Narendra's soul when he initially came to Sri Ramakrishna, but now he was firmly anchored in peace. 'One touch, one glance can change your whole life,' he said later. 'All that I am, all that the world itself will someday be, is owing to my Master, Sri Ramakrishna.'

Ramakrishna loved Narendra and saw him as an embodiment of Narayana. He compared his disciple to a thousand-petalled lotus and asked others not to attempt to assess or judge him in a hurry. Ramakrishna wanted to transfer his supernatural powers to Narendra, but the neophyte declined, telling his Master, 'Let me realize God first 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.'

Ramakrishna shaped the personality of Narendranath and prepared him to dedicate his life to serve humanity. After his death on 16 August 1886 from throat cancer, Naren and his fellow disciples, having recently accepted ochre robes from their guru, established the first monastery in a dilapidated home in Baranagar. Naren, as chief disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, became the founder of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. The message of Vedanta philosophy inspired by Ramakrishna was ably transmitted by Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions held from 23 September 1893 at Chicago and thus began the impressive propagation of the Ramakrishna movement throughout the United States.

“Swamiji 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.”

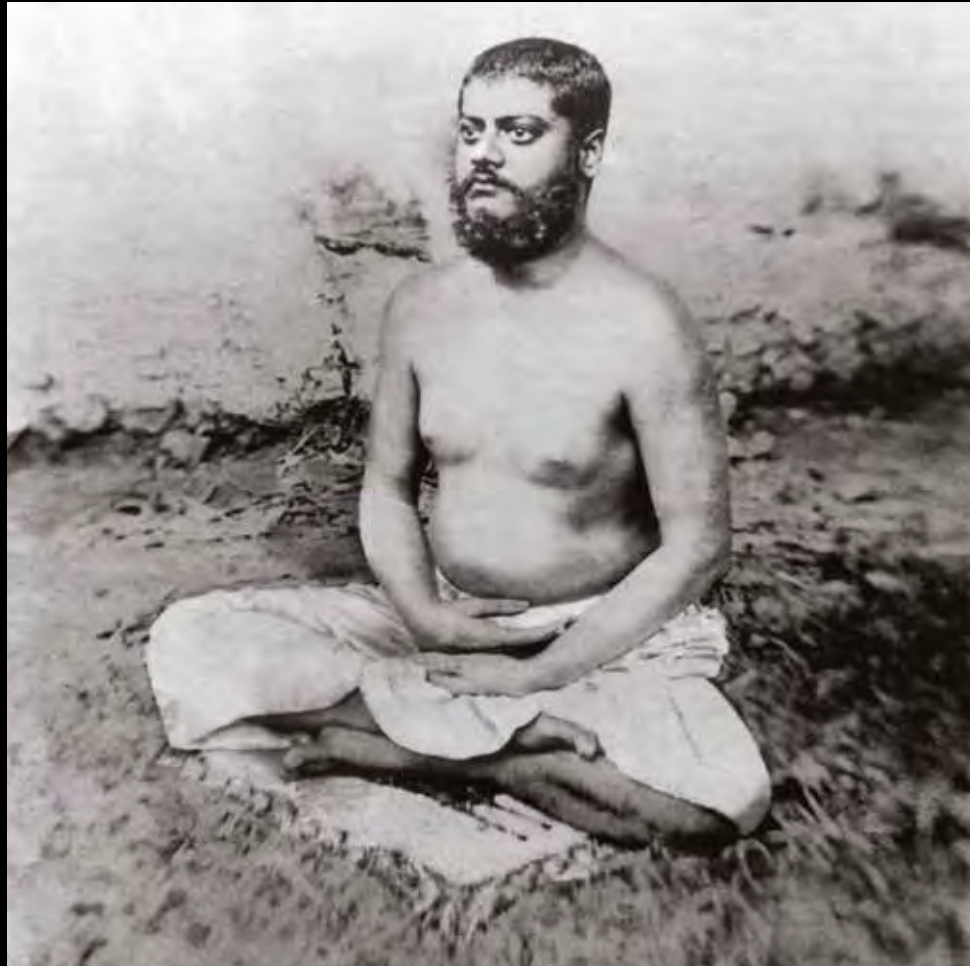
Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose once said, 'Swamiji harmonized the East and the West, religion and science, past and present. And that is why he is great. Our countrymen have gained unprecedented self-respect, self-reliance and self-assertion from his teachings.' 'Swami Vivekananda was undoubtedly successful in constructing a virtual bridge between the East and the West, interpreting Hindu scriptures and philosophy to the Western people and making them realize that in spite of poverty and backwardness, India had a great contribution to make to world culture. He played a key role in ending India's cultural isolation from the rest of the world.'



Ramakrishna Monastery at Baranagar



Baranagar Math, 1887: Standing, left to right - Swami Shivananda, Swami Ramakrishnananda, Swami Vivekananda, the monastery cook, Devendra Mazumdar, Mahendra Nath Gupta, Swami Trigunatitananda, Mustaphi (maternal uncle of Devendra Mazumdar). Sitting, left to right - Swami Niranjanananda, Swami Saradananda, Hutko Gopal and Swami Abhedananda



“You have to grow from the inside out. None can teach you, none can make you spiritual. There is no other teacher but your own soul.”

Swami Vivekananda



Belur Math, 19 June 1899: Standing, from left to right - Devendra Mazumdar, Swami Nirmalananda, Swami Virajananda, Swami Shivananda, Swami Turiyananda, Swami Akhandananda, Swami Vijnanananda, Swami Saradananda, Swami Satchidananda, Mahendra Nath Dutta and U N Dev. Sitting on chair, left to right - Swami Vivekananda and Nadu (Brahmachari Harendranath). Sitting on bench, left to right - Br. Krishnalal, Swami Somananda, Swami Kalyanananda, Swami Advaitananda, Swami Atmananda, Swami Trigunatitananda, Swami Sureshwarananda, Swami Bodhananda, Br. Nandalal, Khanda, Swami Prakashananda, Br. Brajen and Swami Shuddhananda. Below - Swami Nishchayananda



THE GENESIS OF BELUR MATH

“The spiritual impact that has come here to Belur will last fifteen hundred years - and this will be a great university. Do not think I imagine it, I see it.”

Swami Vivekananda



Belur Math during Swami Vivekananda's time



Before his visit to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Swami Vivekananda's days as a wandering monk saw him traverse through many different parts of India. He visited several architectural monuments like the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, the palaces of Rajasthan, ancient temples of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and numerous cities and villages throughout the country. During his travels he was deeply moved to see the appalling poverty of the common people owing to centuries of oppression that had made the poor lose faith in their capacity to improve their lot.

Swami Vivekananda was, perhaps, the first religious leader to openly declare that the real cause of India's disgrace was because of disregarding the poor. The immediate need was to provide food and other bare necessities of life to the hungry millions. For this they needed to be taught basic skills, including improved methods of agriculture and village industries. It was

urgent and necessary to infuse into their minds faith in themselves. As the days went by, what became clear in Swamiji's mind was to carry out his plans for the spread of education, the uplift of the needy and form an efficient organisation of dedicated monks who would devote themselves to inspiring humanity. As he said later, he wanted 'to set in motion a machinery which would bring the noblest of ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest.' With this vision in mind, some years later, after returning from America – having initially garnered much success at the Parliament of Religions – Swamiji founded the Ramakrishna Mission on 1 May 1897 – a religious and spiritual organisation which forms the core of a worldwide spiritual movement. During his tour in America and Europe, he came across several buildings of architectural importance done in Medieval, Gothic and Renaissance styles. Swamiji incorporated all these ideas in the design of the Belur Math temple.



Swamiji's room at Belur Math, where he breathed his last

In January 1897, Swami Vivekananda arrived in Colombo from America with a small group of enthusiastic Western disciples who initially helped him fund his dream. In early 1898 he acquired a big plot of land on the western bank of the Hooghly at a place called Belur. Here he built a permanent abode for the Monastic Order originally started at Baranagar and got it registered as Ramakrishna Math after a couple of years. 1898 also saw the beginning of the Mission's philanthropic activities as relief work started in famine affected areas. Another monastery was founded in Mayavati in the Himalayas, near Almora, and was christened the Advaita Ashram.

The temple at Belur is the heart of the Ramakrishna Movement, remarkable for its architecture that fuses Christian, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist art motifs as a symbol of unity of all religions. Here, Swamiji established a new monastic life which continues to be open to all men, without any distinction of religion, race or caste. Today, the 40-acre campus includes several educational institutions affiliated with the Mission, temples dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, in which their relics are enshrined. The site also houses a museum containing articles connected with the history of the Ramakrishna Math as well as many personal effects of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Ma and Swamiji, including the long coat worn by Vivekananda in the West, Sister Nivedita's table and an organ belonging to Mrs Sevier, one of Swamiji's disciples.

Sri Ramakrishna Temple was consecrated on Makar Sankranti in 1938. It is designed to 'celebrate the diversity of Indian religions' and resembles a temple, a mosque and a church if seen from different angles. Swami Vijnanananda, a brother-monk of Swami Vivekananda and one of the monastic disciples of Ramakrishna, who was, in his pre-monastic life, a civil engineer, designed the shrine. The foundation stone was laid on 16 May 1935. The massive construction was handled by Martin Burn & Co. On completion, the press proclaimed the memorial, 'a symphony in architecture.'



Old shrine at Belur Math as it was during Swami Vivekananda's time



Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati where Swamiji once stayed for two weeks in January 1901

Swami Vivekananda used to reside in a two storeyed house inside the Math on the bank of the river. Here he breathed his last on 4 July 1902. His cenotaph lies within the Math, on the spot where his mortal remains were cremated. The place was chosen by Swamiji himself. His biography records, 'Three days before his passing away, as the Swami was walking up and down on the spacious lawn of the monastery in the afternoon with Swami Premananda, he pointed to a particular spot on the bank of the Ganga and said to his brother-monk gravely, "When I give up the body, cremate it there!" On that very spot stands today a temple in his honour.' Swamiji had predicted that he would not live till the age of forty. On the day of his death he had gone about his daily work at Belur, teaching Sanskrit grammar to the pupils. Then he retired to his room in the evening and died during meditation at around 9 pm. He is said to have attained Maha Samaadhi and the great saint was cremated according to his wishes on the banks of the Ganga.

Strangely, the completion of Swamiji's temple took a long time, almost twenty-one years, for want of funds despite earnest appeals sent not only within India but also abroad. The construction work could only begin in January 1907, almost five years after Swamiji's death.

But the progress was very slow. However, in January 1909, even if the temple construction remained incomplete, a large portrait of the savant was placed and beautifully decorated inside the temple on his birthday. The marble relief installed inside the temple was made

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in Jaipur and became possible by the efforts of Sister Nivedita and with generous financial contribution by Mrs Francis Leggett, Swamiji's associate. Sister Nivedita wrote, 'The sculptor had begun the work with a small puja and offering in front of the marble. Then he prayed intensely to Swamiji veiled in the stone: "Swamiji! Kindly manifest yourself in my hands!" He sent me word that if the work was not accomplished to our satisfaction, he would not accept a single rupee...'

The Holy Mother's temple, also on the Belur Math campus, is dedicated to Sarada Devi, the spiritual consort of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

Today, besides celebrating religious festivals, Belur Math also conducts medical services, education, work specifically targeted for the uplift of women and farmers in rural areas, relief measures during natural calamities and spiritual and cultural activities. As Swamiji had preached, 'Purity, patience and perseverance are the three essentials to success and, above all, love.'



Swami Vivekananda's Temple, Belur Math



The architecture of Belur Math is a melange of Christian, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist art motifs



FOOD GLORIOUS FOOD

“There is greater purity
observed in our cooking than
in any other country.”

Swami Vivekananda



'Having ascertained from Swamiji that, since leaving Ernakulam he had taken almost nothing, I asked him what food he was accustomed to. He replied, "Anything you like; we Sannyasis have no tastes."'

Reminiscences of K Sundarama Iyer

Swami Vivekananda's eating habits were certainly eclectic. He loved cooking and his passion for tea was legendary. The biggest surprise that baffles many of his devotees is the fact that he was not vegetarian and did not just eat fish and eggs but also relished a robust mutton curry, though he drew the line at beef. There is, however, an old story that one day while eating in America Swamiji was served a piece of meat during a meal. When he found out that it was beef, he turned a little pale and looking away, threw up into his napkin. Then, composing himself, he said to his host, 'Please give me another piece. I must get over this prejudice.'

His guru, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was also known to eat fish which Bengalis often clubbed with vegetarian fare. Swamiji always pointed out, 'My Master was a vegetarian; but if he was given meat offered to the Goddess, he used to hold it up to his head.' It probably also helped that in crucial aspects while travelling, Swamiji was able to find acceptable alternatives abroad, most notably for the hilsa fish that he adored. Nearer home in Bengal, while taking a trip down the Ganges, Swamiji had been delighted to find hilsa being sold by fishermen on the riverside, but he insisted on looking for spinach as well. One villager he encountered said he had some and would happily give it to him in exchange for a bit of wisdom! Swamiji laughed and blessed the poor farmer profusely for his wit.

Swami Vivekananda's views on vegetarian and non-vegetarian food were clearly expressed when he pronounced, 'To eat meat is surely barbarous and vegetarian food is certainly purer, especially for those solely leading a spiritual life. But he who has to steer the boat of his life with strenuous labour through the constant life-and-death struggles and the competition of this world must of necessity take meat. So long as there will be in human society such a thing as the triumph of the strong over the weak, animal food is required; otherwise, the weak will naturally be crushed under the feet of the strong. It will not do to quote solitary

instances of the good effect of vegetables on some particular person or persons – compare one nation with another and then draw your conclusions.'

At home, one of his brothers, a strict vegetarian, recalled being forced by young Naren to eat meat for the experience. Naren was certainly a prankster and often pushed pieces of fish into the thalis of unsuspecting friends known for their strict eating habits. All these anecdotes were, however, from the carefree phase of his youth, which then gave way as the years went by to long periods of near starvation, begging and accepting whatever was offered to him as victuals when he ultimately chose the path of a wandering monk.

Swamiji came from a cosmopolitan Kayastha community and while his mother's relatives were vegetarian, his father's family was not. The Ramakrishna Mission, which he set up, mostly serves vegetarian food in its different centres. This is probably more reflective of what people who go there expect, as well as the practicalities of running large kitchens. But there was no

original decree about vegetarian food, and even today the decision is left to individual centres and monks.

In his youth Swamiji set up an organisation called the 'Greedy Club' and did extensive research on cooking. He bought books on French cuisine and happily invented new dishes, including a preparation of khichuri to which eggs, peas and potatoes were added to make it exotic. According to Haripada Mitra, one of his contemporaries, Swamiji liked chillies, pepper and several similar pungent condiments. When one day, way back in 1892, he asked for the reason, Swamiji revealed, 'During his wanderings, a monk has to take all kinds of food and drink water from all sorts of places that tells upon his health. To counteract their bad effect, many monks become addicted to hemp and other intoxicants. For the same reason I have taken to chillies.'

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Some of his favourite dishes

Cornelia Conger recalls that her grandmother, Emily Lyon, a great supporter of Swamiji during his time in 1893 in America 'used to make a little ceremony of making salad dressing at the table, and one of the condiments she used was Tabasco sauce put up by some friends of hers. She once handed him the bottle and said, "You might like a drop or two of this on your meat, Swami." He sprinkled it on with such a lavish hand that we all gasped and said, "But you can't do that! It's terribly hot!" He laughed and ate it with such enjoyment that a special bottle of the sauce was always put at his place after that.'

Swamiji always recommended that 'the best way to enjoy tobacco is to smoke it from a hookah full of water at the bottom and having at its top a lump of flavoured tobacco prepared with spices and molasses.'

Swamiji's gastronomic passion, undeniably, was the hilsa fish. In America, this was almost definitely shad, an American fish of the same family which was as relished on the East Coast of the USA as hilsa in Bengal. Being able to find an alternative for hilsa and Bengali-like greens was vital for

Swamiji's favourite foods included shukto, the characteristic Bengali dish of bitter greens, along with banana flower curry or mochaar ghonto and, of course, hilsa. He also enjoyed pui-shaak or Malabar spinach.

Swamiji's wellbeing while he was abroad. He wrote from New York to his guru-bhais in Calcutta, 'These days you get hilsa in abundance and one can eat to one's fill... There is a variety of spinach which tastes like notey, and what they call 'asparagus' tastes like the young stalk of kochu.' The ice cream that he encountered in America and grew to love came close to his fondness for fish, but did not make

the final cut because, after he developed diabetes, he could no longer relish it.

Swamiji's favourite foods included shukto, the characteristic Bengali dish of bitter greens, along with banana flower curry or mochaar ghonto and, of course, hilsa. He also enjoyed pui-shaak or Malabar spinach. Swamiji always said while he was abroad, 'I am seeing many countries, and many ways and preparations of food; but none of them approaches the admirable cooking of our various dishes of Bengal, and it is not too much to say that one should like to take rebirth for the sake of again enjoying their excellence. It is a great pity that one does not appreciate the value of teeth when one has them! Why should we imitate the West as regards food, and how many can afford to do so? The food which is suitable in our part of the country is cheap, wholesome and nourishing like its wonderful people.'



Picnic at Pasadena, 1900. Swamiji with his foreign followers

MESSAGE TO THE YOUTH

“Youth is the best time. The way in which you utilize this period will decide the nature of coming years that lie ahead of you. Your happiness, your success, your honor and your good name all depend upon the way in which you live now, in this present period. This wonderful period of the first state of your life is related to you as the soft wet clay in the hands of the potter.”

Swami Vivekananda

Fifty years before the British Raj ended in India, Swami Vivekananda had expressed his confidence in the youth of the country while speaking to a mammoth gathering in Madras in 1897. 'My faith is in the younger generation, the modern generation; out of them will come my workers,' he had emphasised. 'They will work out the whole problem, like lions.'

Swamiji himself was the embodiment of youth, dynamism and vibrancy. His extraordinary life and ideals are of utmost inspiration. In a short life of 39 years, he conquered the entire world with his message of compassion and pluralism, inspiring many great personalities both in India and across the world to follow in his footsteps. 'Arise! Awake! And stop not until the goal is reached,' he said time and again.

The writings of Swami Vivekananda can certainly ignite the dullest of minds. Someone had rightly pointed out that if you are lying down and reading Swamiji's works, you will instantly sit upright, then stand up and at once set out towards your mission. Anybody who has come into either direct or indirect contact with his message has witnessed an ocean of change in his or her life. Today, the youth of this country face innumerable challenges and the message of Swami Vivekananda take on fresh meaning and has the power to wonderfully guide them into the future. As he himself had pointed out, 'Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life – think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves and every part of your body be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success.'



At Pasadena, 1900. Swamiji talking to his young disciples

Swamiji was certain that the youth of India have great creative energy, with the potential to take them to extraordinary spiritual heights. He felt that if human creativity was a special quality, then the 'never say die' spirit was its apex. Today, demographically, India is at its youngest best and has the power to meet any trial. This is the perfect time for the youth of the country to be alert and aware, provoked by the restless environment and the incredible challenges that lie ahead. Swamiji had pointed out that in our culture the phase that we call 'youth' refers to what sages had termed Brahmacharya or Vidyarthi Jeevan. As he said, 'Here, you acquire knowledge of not only subjects like history, geography and mathematics but also about human nature, correct vyavahaara, the science of self-control, the art of developing a pure mind, dharma, the duties of man and the proper relationship between you, your family, your society and the world.'

All those years ago Swami Vivekananda had pleaded for the need for nationwide renovation with the ideals of tyag or sacrifice and seva or selfless service – the two most imperative aspects of shaping the lives of young people. The brevity of human triumph and the impermanence of material wealth convinced Swamiji that existence was, alas, ephemeral. Therefore, he challenged the youth of India to give themselves a noble reason to live and pursue lofty ideals that looked beyond material gains. The only qualification Swamiji looked for in youngsters was the ability to feel for others; to have a natural empathy that would make them understand another's pain. He believed that working for any social change required massive energy and spirit. Hence, he requested the youth to amplify both their mental powers and physical fitness. What Swami Vivekananda wanted from the youth were 'muscles of iron' and 'nerves of steel.'

'Practise virtue; persevere in virtue; become established in virtue,' he emphasised. 'Shine as an embodiment of the noblest virtue and heroic adherence to goodness. Youth is meant for this grand process. This period of your time provides the suitable and favourable fields for the working out of this extremely important and most indispensable process in life. This is the special significance, the great importance and supreme value

of youth. It signifies the creation of a noble personality. It is atma-vikaas; it is atma-nirmaan... O fortunate youth, recognise this great duty! Feel this wonderful privilege! Take up this adventure! God watches you graciously, ever ready to help and guide. I wish you to be great. The world has put its faith in you... All the strength and succour you want is within you. Therefore, make your own future. Let the dead past bury its dead. The infinite future is before you and you must always remember that each word and deed lays up a store for you and that, as bad thoughts and bad works are ready to spring upon you like tigers, so also there is the inspiring hope that good thoughts and good deeds are ready with the power of a hundred thousand angels to defend you always and forever.'

Swamiji always held that the real birth of an individual takes place when the purpose of his life germinates. He firmly believed that those who do not have a purpose in life are nothing but 'walking-talking corpses.' Till the purpose of life is not recognised, life is absolutely useless. He expounded time and again that youngsters should decide what they want to do. Right from childhood, they are constantly chained by the thought of careers, forgetting some of the finer aspects that life has to offer.

He expounded time and again that youngsters should decide what they want to do. Right from childhood, they are constantly chained by the thought of careers, forgetting some of the finer aspects that life has to offer.

Swamiji repeatedly reiterated to the youth of India, 'Please try to understand the correct implication of the term "successful life." When you talk of success with reference to life, it does not merely mean succeeding in everything that you undertake or do; it does not merely mean succeeding in fulfilling all wants or getting whatever you desire; it does not mean acquiring a name or attaining a position or imitating fashionable ways... The essence of true success is what you make of yourself. It is the conduct of life that you develop; it is the character that you cultivate and it is the type of person that you become. This is the central meaning of successful living... Your success is not measured in terms of what all you obtained but in terms of what you become, how you live and what actions you do. Upon this point reflect well and attain great happiness.'

12 January, Swami Vivekananda's birthday, is celebrated as National Youth Day.



Swamiji with his American followers.
At the inclined railway, Mount Lowe, California in January 1900



Swami Vivekananda with Sarah Farmer, Charles Malloy and others in the pines at Green Acre, 1894





UNBLEMISHED LOVE

“If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realization. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.”

Sister Nivedita



Sister Nivedita wrote in 1904 to a friend about her decision to follow Swami Vivekananda as a result of her meeting him in England in November 1895: ‘Suppose he had not come to London that time, life would have been like a headless dream for I always knew that I was waiting for something. I always said that a call would come. And it did.’

like a headless always knew for something. that a call would did. But if I had of life, I doubt the time came, have recognised knew little and torture... Always I voice within, but How often I sat down, pen in hand, to speak, and there was no speech! And now there is no end to it! As surely I am fitted to my world, so surely is my world in need of me, waiting; ready. The arrow has found its place in the bow. But if he had not come! If he had meditated on the Himalayan peaks I, for one, should never have been in India.’

Born on 28 October 1867 in Dungannon in North Ireland where she spent her childhood and early days of youth, Margaret Elizabeth Noble was the daughter of Mary Isabel and Samuel Richmond and who would come to be known throughout India as Sister Nivedita. Hailing from a family of Wesleyan ministers, her father had always taught her that service to mankind remained the true service to God. His words, thus, had made a lasting impression on her mind. But her search had not ended.

Margaret’s maternal grandfather was a respected member of the Irish national movement. Yet her early life was spent in considerable deprivation though she was fond of music and art. She lost her father when she was only 10 years old, studying thereafter at a charitable boarding school in northern England. At 17, she began working as a teacher to take care of her mother and younger siblings. She was even committed to marrying a Welsh youth who, most unfortunately, died soon after their engagement. Margaret was heartbroken and moved to London. By 25, she had started her own school in Wimbledon. In London, she joined the Sesame Club, where she met fellow writers George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Huxley.

Soon Margaret Noble acquired a reputation as an experimental educationist, influenced by ideas popular in continental Europe at the time, including those of Friedrich Froebel, father of the kindergarten concept. Her success brought her in touch with London's intellectual crème de la crème, and in November 1895, in what proved to be a pivotal moment in her life, she was invited to a private gathering to hear a 32-year-old 'Hindu yogi' who had acquired a considerable reputation in America in the preceding two years.

Margaret was late for the meeting at a home in West End to which her friends had persuaded her to come. As she slipped into the drawing room, she saw Swami Vivekananda seated on the floor in a meditative pose, his face radiant with dignity and poise. Nearly fifteen to sixteen curious listeners – newcomers to Hindu thought – sat around the Swami in a half circle and listened with rapt attention. Margaret took a seat quietly and devoured every word, every idea and every concept that the Master propagated. His magic utterances were filled with deep meaning about true religion; words sweet yet foreign to this educated, literate, bold and intelligent woman that finally washed away all her sorrows. At the gathering, Swami Vivekananda's tidings seemed to speak directly to Margaret's own beliefs about the best in human nature. His declarations were a call to action – to serve suffering humanity; to sacrifice one's life for the good of others. One particular aspect that she noticed about the savant was that he never quoted anything other than the Gita, the Vedas and the Upanishads. He was deeply convinced of the need for ancient Indian thought to penetrate the Western psyche so that a beneficent amalgamation of science and spirituality could surface all over.

Swami Vivekananda recognised that this intense Irish acolyte could be of huge assistance in his efforts to uplift Indian women. And Margaret knew she had found her true calling. She recounted later, 'I had recognised the heroic fibre of the man, and desired to make myself the servant of his love for his own people. But it was his character to which I had thus done obeisance.'

Soon after, Margaret Noble travelled to Calcutta in January 1898. On 11 March that year Swamiji organised a public meeting at Star Theatre to introduce her to the people of the city. In his speech he declared, 'England has sent us another gift in Miss Margaret Noble.' Margaret too expressed her desire to serve India and its people. Thereafter, on 17 March, she met Sarada Devi, wife and spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, who, surpassing all language and cultural barriers, embraced her as her khuki or daughter. And finally, on 25 March, Swami Vivekananda christened her Nivedita, meaning 'Dedicated to God', and initiated her into the vows of Bramhacharya or celibacy by giving her diksha.



Sara Bull whom Swamiji called Dhiramata



Josephine MacLeod



Left to right: Josephine MacLeod, Sara Bull, Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita. Kashmir, 1898

Margaret Noble of London thus transformed into Calcutta's beloved Sister Nivedita.

Subsequently, along with a few others like Josephine MacLeod and Sara Bull, Swamiji and Sister Nivedita undertook a five-month journey across the northern and western parts of the country, during which her guru spoke extensively on religion, history, geography and ethnology. In India, she found her soul's home and destiny. But the initial days were exceedingly difficult. It goes to Nivedita's credit that she withstood Vivekananda's harsh discipline, although she did have emotional breakdowns from time to time, when she was comforted by Mrs Bull and Josephine. At the end, she would admit, 'I understood, for the first time that the greatest teachers may destroy in us a personal relation in order to bestow the Impersonal Vision in its place.'

After this initial phase of learning and exposure, Nivedita settled in the Bengali neighbourhood of Baghbazar in north Calcutta, an area Europeans hardly ventured into. In November, still in her first year in the country, she started a school at her home in 16 Bosepara Lane for girls from orthodox families where child marriage was widespread and women were hardly educated. She was keen to instruct girls who were deprived of even basic education.





Swamiji at Green Acre

} making a difference to
the way people live }

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