

Book Review

World's Parliament of Religions 1893. Participation from the Indian Subcontinent with Photographs of the World's Exposition

Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya
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Along with Nrisingha P. Sil, Niranjana Dhar and Surath Chakravarti, Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya belongs to that small but powerful league of authors who represent a zealously revisionist and critical scholarship on the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition, more specifically on Swami Vivekananda. The work under review is a contemporary reading of the World Parliament of Religions, convened at Chicago in 1893, celebrated both at the time and thereafter. The event affected several nations of the world, most notably the USA and India. On the one hand, it demonstrated the industrial and economic might of the USA as indeed was the intention of the organizers; on the other, it provided a great boost to Indian nationalism and the personal image of Vivekananda as a spokesperson of a subject people. Vivekananda's success at the Parliament not only put Hinduism on the global map but offered a colonized nation a new voice that echoed deep conviction and self-belief. Little known to Indians themselves before 1893, the Swami hereafter became a revered nationalist icon. However, though not oblivious of the impact that the event had on global history, Chattopadhyaya contests the allegedly disproportionate importance given to Swami Vivekananda to the relative neglect of other participants from the subcontinent.

The Parliament of Religions was hosted across a large area in central Chicago and lasted for about 18 days. It attracted participants from no less than 17 nations with India sending one of the largest contingents. This number

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might have been larger had there not been constraints of language and resources. Thanks to Chattopadhyaya, we now know that the number of Indian participants was around 20 which included four Christian missionaries, spokespersons representing Buddhism, Jainism, the Brahmo Samaj, Dev Dharm, Theosophy, Sri Vaishnavism-Vishishtadvaita, the Kayasth community of Lahore, Indian Islam, Hinduism and the sole woman representative, Jeanne Sorabji. Of these at least four did not attend the Parliament but sent papers that were read out on appropriate occasions. There were also those who attended but did not speak. Although Chattopadhyaya does not mention this, I do know that the Organizing Committee had also sent out an invitation to Dulal Chand, the leader of the rural Kartabhaja sect from Bengal, but 30 years after he had passed away. Among those who declined to participate were the Sultan of Turkey and the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is commonly believed that the Archbishop did not condescend to share the platform with 'heathen' and colonial subjects from British India. If Chattopadhyaya is to be believed, it was also on this occasion that hamburgers and Quaker Oats were first introduced into the American diet!

The work under review has three chapters in all which are useful summaries of press coverage on Indian participants at the Parliament. These are interspersed by reproductions of press columns appearing in major newspapers of the east coast and Midwest covering the events. Understandably, the bulk of them is drawn from Chicago-based papers. There is also an excellent collection of rare photographs of the city and its various sites taken from two sources, the official report on the Parliament by

John Henry Barrows and from James W. Buel's *The Magic City* (1894).

Chattopadhyaya concludes that contrary to public perception, it was not Vivekananda but the Sinhalese Buddhist, Anagarika Dharmapala, who was the star attraction among Indian delegates at the Parliament. He demonstrates this in a tabular form, judging by the number of pages devoted to each Indian delegate in either Barrow's book or else in press columns. One has to say though that such computation does not appear to take into account matters like differences in editorial policy, whims of the reporter and the quality of the paper or speech reported. There is evidently a subjective element buried in these sources that cannot be discounted. Perhaps the inclusion of a paper would have also increased the space given to a delegate when compared to shorter summaries of oral presentations.

It is not improbable that the history of the event may have been somewhat 'distorted' by the followers of Vivekananda as Chattopadhyaya claims (Preface). It is also on record that the Swami continued to write home unhappy letters alleging indifference and hostility from people such as the Brahmo Protap Chandra Mozoomdar, the Buddhist Dharmapal and the Theosophists. And yet, even assuming this to be true, the fact remains that of all the Indian delegates it is only the work of Vivekananda that has endured and continues to mark its presence in contemporary America. Admittedly, delegates other than Vivekananda have suffered from neglect which needs to be corrected. And yet, in his bid to offer us a corrective, Chattopadhyaya himself commits an identical mistake.

What this work visibly lacks is an analytical commentary on the presentations made by all Indian delegates and of the press coverage these received. Chattopadhyaya fails to notice the misrepresentations of some Indian religious sects that the American press was guilty of. Thus, on 25 September 1893, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* called the Brahmo Samaj 'the Christian branch of the Buddhists'. Apparently, some delegates like Sorabji and Nagarkar chose to speak not on religious matters but the social and the likes of Manilal Dwivedi and Mozoomdar angrily referred to Muslim atrocities on Hindus in a manner that might not have fostered inter-religious tolerance and understanding that the Parliament meant to promote. I personally also think that the work could have been better organized. There is much extraneous material that distracts attention as for instance the excerpt from Mozoomdar's *Sketches of a Tour Round the World, 1884* or how a European Muslim defended polygamy in Islam, much to the distaste of the audience present. On page 66, the author miscalculates the number of days that the American press covered Dharmapal (8 days, not 7 going by Table 3). On the same page, he also wrongly uses the word 'discovered' in place of 'invented'.

On the whole, the author is to be commended for having so painstakingly compiled such rare source-material on a subject of enduring interest. Scholars and laymen who wish to take a fresh look at the events of 1893 will do well to turn to this well researched work which enjoys the twin advantages of being both accessible and affordable.