Swami Vivekananda addressed the Parliament of Religion at Chicago on 11th September 1893 in the Hall of Columbus. He stood there on the platform of the Parliament as the living embodiment of universality and harmony, the two key needs of the modern age. What he taught in subsequent years was only a commentary on his addresses at the Parliament. Swamiji stood there as the coordinator of the different sects and religions, urging everyone to give up the frog-in-the-well mentality and become universal. What would this universal religion be like? Swamiji explained in the Parliament.

.... if there is even to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of krṣṇa and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for, every human being, from the lowest groveling savage not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for prosecution or intolerance in its policy, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be created in aiding humanity to realize its own true divine nature.

This was the religion Vivekananda represented at the Parliament. It was in fact the Religion beyond all religions.

The importance of the Parliament of Religions can never be overestimated. The Parliament in 1893 had delegates from all corners of the world who represented a wide spectrum of religious faiths around the globe. The sheer magnitude of its size and the immensity of the public response and media coverage, it received make the parliament a unique event in the religious history of the world.

In a letter to his brother disciples, Swamiji wrote: Everything must be sacrificed, if necessary, for that one sentiment universality.

Vivekananda religion taught him to search through multiplicity and duality for the ultimate unity which is the unchanging base of an ever changing world. To reach the Universal Religion, recognition of the necessity of variation is as important as that of underlying unity. If one religion is true, all others must be true. He proclaimed at Parliament of Religion, "We believe not only in
universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true."

Religion had generated both intense love and diabolical hatred, but accepting all religions meant worshipping god with each of them. "I shall go to the Mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall ... kneel before the crucifix ... I shall take refuge in Buddha ... I shall sit down in medication, with the Hindu." In the present situation in the world, the significance of such a religious approach cannot be overestimated. When the unitary outlook that science today hints at and that Swami taught and made available to everyone becomes pervasive among mankind, most of the problems that plague our human species will simply disappear. Human life will take on a new meaning: traditional human assumptions and attitudes will become transformed. "Then alone a man loves, Swamiji said in a New York lecture.

..... when he finds that the object of his love is not a clad of earth, but it is the veritable God himself; that man will love his greatest enemy who knows that very enemy is God Himself ... Such a man becomes a world mover for whom his little self is dead and God stands in its place ... If all mankind today realize only a bit of that great truth, the aspect of the whole world will be changed, and, in place of fighting and quarrelling, there would be a reign of peace."

This outlook - the spiritual outlook is absolutely essential to the present age. There will be no place in a world of untold power and knowledge for anything but the broadest acceptance of all human cultures of all individuals, of all the varied ways in which human being search for truth. The future world will brook no barriers between persons, genders, creeds, races, cultures, and nations; for in the truth in the vast ocean of life there are no barriers, and truth alone will be able to survive in a world where no knowledge will be withheld from any person.

"Vedanta says this separation does not exist, said Swami Vivekananda.

..... It is not real. It is merely apparent, on the surface. In the heart of things there is unity still. If you go below the surface, you find that unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, gods and men, and men and animals. If you go deep enough, all will be seen as only variations of the one.'

We have seen a growing indifference to all spiritual values and the complete irrelevance of religious thought in the political life of all advanced nations, and also the menacing growth of religious fundamentalism in the different parts of the world, threatening freedom of expression and alternative viewpoints. We have also seen the phenomenal growth of popular religions promising false hopes and legitimizing superstitions; and politicians, in connivance with theologians and priests, using religion to muzzle all voices of dissent.

The quality of life of man will depend upon the relationship between different religions as well as on the extent of space that each religion can create to ensure and encourage freedom to question.

Vivekananda cautioned against the hope for exclusive survival of .... one religion and destruction of others. But can pluralism solve the problems of religious hostilities and resist the tendency of destroying one by another?

Some believe in pluralism from the conviction that it provides a wider range of alternatives, a greater freedom of choice and consequently by greater opportunities of self expression and self realization. Some believe in it as a convenient and respectable strategy for the maintenance of social harmony and communal peace, particularly in a multi-religious society like
India. Whether one learns to accept the validity of religions out of faith and conviction, as Gandhi did, or whether one learns to treat another person's religion with tolerance out of an understanding of the historical bonds between the community and that religion, as Nehru did - the present and the future of human society has hardly any other option.

The unique contribution of Swami Vivekananda lies in the formulation of unity when he said that... 'Each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.'

The importance of the Chicago address was there to rouse this unique sense of all-inclusive unity, in which nothing is to be left out or shunned as not belonging to the one. We have to plump deep in all writings of the Swami in order to have a clear idea of this unity, for which he lived and died and of which the seed was laid in his historic Chicago address.

The drawing of this sense of unity is the only panacea for all the ills of the world, which is today torn by division, discord and diffusion, and the concluding words of Swami Vivekananda Chicago addresses will then alone be a reality; "Harmony and Peace and not Dissensions."

Souribandhu Kar lives at Plot No.5012/5853, Gajaptai Nagar, Bhubaneswar.