

# Swami Vivekananda's Voice Recording?

*A note on voice recordings of speeches given at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893*

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## The Much-asked Question

The much-asked question whether there are any voice recordings of any of the speeches of Swami Vivekananda at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893 has been investigated by the author. Swami Chidananda of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society, Chicago, indicated to the author that he had made enquiries and found that there were no such recordings. Swami Chetanananda of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis also followed up this matter and corresponded with the Chicago Historical Society (Archives and Manuscripts) and the Library of Congress, as suggested by the Historical Society. The conclusion was that there were no such recordings.

Marie Louise Burke, the well-known researcher on Swamiji's visits to the West, who discussed this matter with Swami Prabhanda, the present General Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, during her visit to Belur Math in January 1994, also indicated something similar. She told him that according to two historians who have specialised in that period of American History and also according to her own searches, Swami

Vivekananda's speech was not recorded during the Parliament of Religions.

The author also directly corresponded by email with the Research Wing of the Chicago Historical Society, and the Art Institute Archives, Chicago. They have confirmed to the



*Edison Home Phonograph*

author that there are no recordings available; the Art Institute archives also said, 'There is no indication that any voice recordings were made at the Congress'. This is understandable considering the limitation of technology in those days.

A long-standing devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri M.S. Nanjundiah from Bangalore worked in the World Bank at Washington D.C., USA for about sixteen years, and held the positions of Financial Adviser and Senior Operations Adviser. Prior to joining the World Bank he was a Senior Officer in the Ministry of Railways and later in the Ministry of Finance, Economic Affairs Department. His deep association with Ramakrishna Movement led to the publication of *A Spiritual Centre Blossoms*—a large volume chronicling the 100-year history of Ramakrishna Math, Bull Temple Road, Bangalore. □





*Cylinder recorder*



*Edison Recording Cylinder*

### Some Findings by the Author

The author has reviewed the position regarding the technology available in US in 1893 for voice recording and the manner in which the recordings were made—record making required the person to speak into a mouthpiece attached to a diaphragm which was connected to a stylus that etched vibration patterns from a sound source on a rotating cylinder (The Berliner Gramophone, which could record on discs for 2 minutes only, became popular in USA only in 1894). Only 'two minute' cylinders were in use and *these could record for only 2 to 3 minutes. Recordings outside studios were not practicable; getting an acceptable quality involved a lot of effort even in studios. In view of the limitations of the technology, a recording of the sessions at the Parliament of Religions in 1893 would not have happened.*

It appears that there is a voice recording now being circulated on Internet and else-

where as Swamiji's voice. This is unfortunate. The recording includes not only the first address but other addresses as well and runs for several minutes; such recordings were not feasible, for the reasons indicated above.

Also one recording that is circulating has a lady introducing Swami Vivekananda. This shows it is not genuine. Swami Vivekananda himself has said in a letter written to Alasinga Perumal [an admirer of Swamiji from Madras] on 2 November 1893 that Dr Barrows introduced him; also that the applause after his opening statement, 'Sisters and Brothers. . .' lasted *two minutes*. The applause in the recording is only a few seconds. There is another aspect. Recordings of that era (such as Edison cylinder recordings) when retrieved after many years have an 'accumulated noise' which, if removed, will distort the sound; the recording under circulation has no such noise. It cannot, therefore, be an authentic recording. □

'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. . .'

—**Swami Vivekananda**, in his opening address at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, 1893