

A LIFE SKETCH OF SHRI VIRCHAND RAGHAVJI GANDHI

By

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A great soul, a great patriot and a great exponent of the Jaina religion in the West, Shri Virchand Raghavji Gandhi, was born in Mahuva, a small town, near Bhavnagar in Saurashtra on the 25th August 1864 AD. His father was a well-to-do gentleman of the town and though not endowed with wealth, was known for his honesty, integrity and religious-mindedness. He was a reformer and a man of great practical sense. He had fought against social evils and had succeeded in eradicating some.

Shri Virchand was sent to a school in the town for his primary education at an early age. He was a brilliant and a promising boy. He was then sent to Bhavnagar for further studies. He passed his Matriculation examination of the University of Bombay, in the year 1880 AD at an early age of 16 years. Shri Virchand was a scholar and had a great thirst for knowledge. He made up his mind to go in for higher studies. In the same year, he entered the Elphinstone College in Bombay. In 1884 AD Shri Virchand graduated and took his degree of B.A. of the University of Bombay with honors. Probably he was the first graduate amongst the Jains.

After graduation, Shri Virchand had signed articles of clerkship with Messrs. Little & Co. , Solicitors and started reading for Solicitors examination. But though brilliant and a keen mind, he was not destined to be a Solicitor. He had inherited and imbibed the spirit of reform and social service and his mind was working in that direction. Soon he found an opportunity.

About this time in 1884 A.D, the Jain Association of India was established in Bombay with the objects of bringing the Jains of various parts of India nearer together and to organize them with a view to achieve their social, moral and educational uplift; to look after the management of the religious and charitable trusts, to strive for preventing slaughter of cattle and to remove the hardships experienced by pilgrims in the places of pilgrimages in India. Shri Virchand was selected to be its honorary secretary. In this Institution, he found scope for achieving the objects dearer to his heart and he did accomplish solution of various difficult and important problems of the day.

The Thakore Saheb of Palitana had levied a pilgrim tax on all the pilgrims going there. Apart from the amount of tax, it entailed many hardships and it was galling to the Jains. Shri Virchand made strenuous efforts and succeeded in removing the tax. His efforts brought about a compromise with the Thakore Saheb by which Shri Anandji Kalyanji Pedhi of Ahmedabad agreed to pay a lump sum of Rs. 15,000.00 per year as Rakhopa money for looking after the safety of the pilgrims and the holy place and the tax was abolished.

Another great achievement of Shri Virchand was his success in removal of a tallow factory started on the Sacred Hill of Sammet Shikar in Bihar. An Englishman called Boddam took a lease of a portion of the Hill from the Rajah of Palgunje and started construction of a factory for slaughtering pigs and making tallow out of them. This caused great resentment in the minds of the Jains all over India. It was a great blow for the Jains, as it violated the very first principle of Ahimsa, i.e., nonviolence, as the factory erected on the Hill, every inch of which is made sacred by the twenty Tirthankaras, who achieved Nirvana (liberation) there. Jains had made efforts to remove the factory and had filed a suit in the Subordinate Judge's Court in Bihar ; but in the trial Court, they failed. Then an appeal was filed from the Judgment of the trial Court in the High Court of Calcutta. Shri Virchand was entrusted with this task. He went to Calcutta and stayed there for the work of this appeal. It is said that he learnt the Bengali language to correctly translate various relevant documents written in the Bengali language and script. Shri Virchand's great zeal and untiring efforts were largely responsible for winning the appeal and removing the tallow factory from the Hill. This case subsequently came to be known as a Piggery Case. The whole Hill and every inch of it, every stone and pebble, is regarded by the Jains as sacred and an object of worship. The foreign British rulers of our country recognized the sacredness of the Hill and respected the feelings and religious sentiments of the Jains then, and the piggery factory was removed. But it is a strange irony of

fate that our own Government in the name of the agrarian reforms has deprived us of the Hill and taken possession of it with the object of developing the forest and forest industries. What was achieved by the great efforts of Shri Virchand by appeal to justice in British times, is being set at naught by our own rulers.

Then came the opportunity, which made him famous, which raised Shri Virchand to a very high pedestal of a great exponent of the Jaina religion in the Western world and for which he is dearly remembered by the Jainas. In the year 1893, a great Congress of World Religions was called in Chicago, where leaders of various religions all over the world were invited. Our great Acharya Shri Vijayanandsuri popularly known as Muni Shri Atmaramji, whose fame as a great leader of the Jaina religion had spread far and wide, was invited by the organizers to attend the Congress. The principles of right conduct of a Jaina sadhu would not permit him to go to America, which he could not do without making use of a steamer. But Acharya Atmaramji Maharaj did want the Jaina religion to be represented in the Congress. He wrote a letter to the Jaina Association of India in Bombay to send some one to represent the Jaina religion in the Congress. The choice fell on Shri Virchand, who had by the time become known for his brilliance, his zeal and study of the religious philosophy and devoutness. His name was approved by the Acharya Maharaj Shri Virchand then went to the Acharya Maharaj and had special instructions and training in the principles, practice and philosophy of the Jaina religion.

Then Shri Virchand sailed for America to attend the Congress of World Religions to represent the Jaina religion. Amongst the other representatives was the great Swami Vivekananda. The Congress of World Religions was a unique gathering of leaders of world religions, all-intelligent, devout and eager, learned and anxious to express and present the principles of their religion and to learn from the others. It provided a great opportunity for comparative study of different religions. Many tolerant minds had thought of some such gathering and some attempts were said to have been made before in that direction ; but the Congress held at Chicago was the first of its kind and has remained the last. It was great and unique in its conception, representation, and honesty of purpose.

Those were the days of rank orthodoxy. There was very little education in the sense in which it is understood now. Education was only taking its roots. The people's mind was overridden by superstition and narrow cramped ideas of life. Some protest was raised against Shri Virchand's going to America even for such a laudable object. It was considered to be a sin to cross the seas and go to foreign lands. But Shri Atmaramji Maharaj was a very farsighted saint and he did not mind such protests and gave his blessings to Shri Virchand going to America to attend the Congress.

The Congress which was also known as the Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago in U.S.A. during September 1893. It lasted for 17 days from 11th September 1893 to 27th September 1893. When all the representatives of various religions presented and expounded principles and philosophy of their religions particularly they dealt with such topics as the origin of the universe, the existence of God, the causes of suffering, happiness and misery in the world, the ultimate purpose of life and ethics. Shri Virchand delivered several speeches inside and outside the Congress, which created deep and abiding impressions on the mind of the American people. He expounded to them what this universe is, whether there is any being called God as the creator of this universe, what is the ultimate purpose of life and such other things.

He explained to them;

- Navatatva (the nine principles in this universe),
- Shaddravaya (the six substances),
- Chhargati (the four states of existence),
- Panchavvratha (five great and small vows of conduct,)
- Moksha (the ultimate state of soul when liberated from karma),
- Nyayavad (the assertion of truth from a particular aspect),
- Anekanthavad (the principle of Jaina Philosophy which explains that a particular statement is true from a particular aspect and not true from another aspect).

Anekanthavad is a principle, which attempts to try and reconcile various points of view and is a peculiar contribution of Jainas to the attainment of knowledge.

His speeches were very much appreciated and made a deep impression about the Jaina religion as a rational religion on the mind of the American public. An eminent contemporary American wrote about him at that time in very eloquent terms. He said that " A number of distinguished Hindu scholars, philosophers and religious teachers attended and addressed the Parliament; some of them taking rank with the highest of any race for learning, eloquence and piety. But it is safe to say that no one of the oriental scholars was listened to with greater interest than was this young layman of the Jainas as he declared the Ethics and Philosophy of his people". Priests, public men and the press spoke in eulogistic and glowing terms and paid tributes to his scholarship, learning, intelligence and culture. One Hon. E. B. Sherman, who was a master in Chancery of the United states, Circuit Courts said about Shri Virchand that " It has rarely, if ever, been my good fortune to meet a man, whose reading and culture have been so wide and varied, and who withal has so sweet, sincere and teachable a spirit as Mr. Gandhi."

At the time the Congress was held the knowledge of the American public about India and the life and culture of her people was scanty. India was believed to be the land of heathens having no culture and no civilized life. It was believed to be the land of the Maharajas, tigers and cobras. Many charitable minded men and societies sent Christian missions to civilize the people here and impart culture and religion to them. The Christian missionaries, who had come down to India had, either out of ignorance, absence of proper understanding or by making unwarranted generalizations from stray facts or instances, deliberately spread false, incorrect, twisted and perverse notions and ideas about Indian life, culture, civilization and religions. During his stay in America, he took an opportunity to correct them. His mind rose in revolt against this state of things and led forthright emphatic and direct attacks on the ignorance and perverse ideas of the American people about India. His language was direct and forceful and his expression was fearless. He exposed the propaganda and activities of the Christian missionaries working in India.

Shri Virchand was a polyglot. He knew many languages, as many as 14 languages. He was also a student of Buddhism and Vedanta Philosophy. He had acquired knowledge of Christianity and Western Philosophy. He also had knowledge of Yoga and Occultism. He had made a comparative study of various philosophies which equipped him for talks on various subjects with confidence.

Shri Virchand was gifted with a fine and charming personality. He had a fairly tall, stately, well built figure. He had well chiselled well proportioned features and a fine, brilliant and lustrous face. For his American sojourn, he had selected a dress, which added charm to his personality. He put on a royal purple robe and a gold colored turban. He had round his waist a white sash with a knot on the right and two ends hanging to his knees. He also wore oriental shoes. This make up created an oriental and hallowed atmosphere round him. He looked like a priest, sober, serene and peaceful, eager to achieve his object.

His speeches at the World Congress and outside created such a deep and brilliant impression that the American people began to love and like him. Some men were really attracted towards the principles and practice of the Jaina religion. He was requested by them to extend his stay in America and give them lessons in Jaina philosophy and practice. He delivered a series of illuminating lectures in important cities in America like Chicago, Boston, New York and Washington. Wherever he went he was very cordially received and he created an atmosphere of love and liking for the Jaina religion. Some persons were so much attracted that they began to practise Jaina ceremonies and observe rituals. He had established a Society for the promotion of Jaina religion which was called Gandhi Philosophical Society, where he conducted study classes in Jaina religion. He stayed in America for about two years and returned to India in 1895 A.D.

On his arrival in India, he was accorded a very cordial and enthusiastic welcome in Bombay. His mind was so much imbued with religion and social service that he did not think of his profession or any business for his material well being. He devoted himself to further study of Jaina philosophy and other comparative philosophies. In Bombay, he started an institution called "" Hemachandracharya Class,, for the promotion and spread of the theory and practice of the Jaina religion. He delivered there various

lectures on difficult and abstruse subjects like " The Doctrine of Karma ,, " Ultimate principles,' etc. He was invited to deliver discourses under the auspices of the Arya Samaj, Buddhiwardhak Sabha and Theosophical Society. While he was doing such useful work here, he was again requested by his American friends to pay them a second visit and give instructions in Jaina religion. He considered it good in the interest of his religion that he should accept the invitation and go to America again. He sailed for America a second time in the year 1896 A.D. His fame had spread to England and other European countries, where also he was invited to give discourses on Jaina religion.

On his second tour to the Western countries, he divided his time between America and England. He delivered his lectures and conducted study classes for six months in America and for six months in England. While in England, he kept term at one of the Inns of Court for qualifying himself for the Bar. He was then called to the Bar but he did not practise. Advocacy for mundane causes for money did not attract him. He preferred to remain a barrister for his religion. He had travelled to France Germany and other places in Europe and delivered discourses on the Jaina religion. His discourses were very much appreciated and he was liked and loved by the people there.

In 1898 Shri Virchand was called away from this useful work in Europe. An appeal in the matter of Shatrunjaya Tirtha had to be preferred to the Secretary of State for India. He was selected for the task and entrusted with that appeal. For the purposes of this appeal, he again went to England and strove for winning the appeal, which brought him well-deserved success.

While he was in England, his health suddenly took a turn for the worse. He had to leave England abruptly though luckily he had successfully finished his work of appeal. He returned to India but within only a few weeks after his return on 7th August 1901, shri Virchand made good bye to this frail world. He was only 37 years. He was a brilliant promising young man, full of hopes and aspirations of service to his religion and Community. Such an eventful life of many useful and important activities for the religion, full of promise for future was prematurely cut off to the utter dismay and sorrow of the Jainas.